



The sound of skating

I have an image burnt into my mind that I wanted to try and repeat. It was triggered by a picture published in sister magazine Boat Angler way back in March 1997, showing three anglers handling a huge Scottish skate. I wanted to do the same thing...

If dreams came true I would have won the lottery, owned a huge Fairline cruiser and hauled a 150lb skate alive and kicking aboard our small 16ft dinghy. As it happens none of the fantasies have materialised... but I keep buying the tickets and haven't given up fishing yet!



Matt Styles with his 112lb male!

The fantasy about the skate began almost 18 months ago when I saw the pictures of members of the North-East Dinghy Anglers Club with a big skate they had bagged in the Sound of Mull. It all looked so simple... lower a big bait into the deep waters, wait, and haul 'em up! What a naive view of skating I had.

With my mind ticking over, plans began to formulate. I needed boat, crew, inside information, time and weather. The logistics, which seemed formidable for what I had in mind, were risky. A sort of skate or bust, with bust being the operative word.

Faxes, one-to-ones, they began to mount as Christmas came and went. Our new boat, an Orkney 520, arrived and I had flashing images of a huge skate sliding over the gunnels. Oh, yes, this is what I wanted, really, really wanted.

I had had enough of piddly conger, tame thornbacks, sluggish cod and short of steam pollack. Top of my want list was a skate and I wanted to catch, play and beat it aboard the magazine's own small dinghy. I mean, anyone can catch a fish aboard a

charter boat. Easy Boy Scout stuff.

The year rolled on and the team gathered, one party heading north up the M6 towards the Scottish border with a 21ft boat in tow. Our hit squad ran a parallel course up the A1 to Scotch Corner, then turned west across the Pennines to Penrith. Turning starboard we all finally met up at Annandale at the top end of the M74.

Pleased to see the boats still at their moorings in the hotel car park the following morning we continued steaming north through Lanarkshire, round the Glasgow ring road, alias the M8, and up alongside Loch Lomond to the outskirts of Tarbet.

Here the FPO decided to navigate via the scenic route; the A83 via the edge of Loch Fyne, famous for its oysters, touching Inverary, then northwards again until we hit the A85 and turned to port for Oban. Hmm, interesting. Thank God we had a 3.2 Isuzu Trooper pulling the 21-footer!

We trundled into Oban well ahead of the ferry sailing and I went to do a deal for an earlier crossing and pay for the vehicles and trailers. I could have had a great holiday on



Main pic: Brian Swinbanks, seated left, aboard *Mistress* somewhere between Ardnamurchan and Coll

Left: A shy Chris Solomon caught a 105lb fish

Bottom Left: *Mistress* pushes out to sea behind the *Sea Angler* boat

Below: *Sea Angler* got her bum wet! Tobermory is in the background

Far Bottom: The crew bring the big Orkney 21 back on its trailer



the Costa del Lager for what it cost for the 45 minute sailing to Craignure on the Isle of Mull. Now we know better and shall tow to Oban, park the trailers and steam down the Sound to Tobermory!

We meet the master, Brian Swinbanks

As I said earlier, you need some inside information for a long range trip like this and who better than Brian Swinbanks, who skippered the highly successful skate boat *Laurencia* out of Tobermory for years.

No sooner had we drawn into Tobermory's handy car park - more of that later - than he pulled in and greeted us with an armful of charts, masses of

information and a promise to take us bait fishing the following morning.

Tobermory is a dinghy angler's delight. Within view, and no more than two minutes walking distance, is a pub that does great food, a garage for refuelling the boats, a free launch slip, stacks of free parking for trailers and a distillery!

Another two minutes walk and there are guest houses, hotels, more pubs, a chandlery, Co-op for onboard scoff and a bank all neatly lined up in Tobermory High Street which looks directly out on to the Sound and the gateway to the glorious skate grounds.

The following bright, sunny morning saw us shake down for our first trip in Scottish waters. Brian was waiting on Tobermory steps to be picked up, his arms full of Knotless Tackle freebies. With his skippering days now behind him he runs the successful Knotless Fishing Tackle and Bridun Lures companies with younger brother, Duncan.

You might also remember it was

Brian who put a certain Mr Banks over a mark eight miles off Tobermory way back in 1986 when he caught Britain's biggest skate to-date weighing 227lb. I didn't want to be greedy - 150lb would have done me!

Our little group steamed west past Ardmore Point and out to hard ground towards Coll. In a freshening sea we drifted with feathers to take a good mix of middling pollack, smaller coalsies and baskets of mackerel. The scenery was spectacular with Ardnamurchan lighthouse starkly marking the most western tip of the British mainland.

There was so much to see that the fishing probably took second place and when we finally moved under the sheer cliffs of An Acairseid it was a sheer joy to drift in the unpolluted waters for spunky reef pollack.

Now Brian, who knows about these things, explained that the older the bait, the better the chance of catching a skate. Evidently, skate love a pongy bait, the 'softer' the better! So with two good boxes of baitfish gathered we reckoned it was time to go skating...





Tina with a 4lb pollack baitfish

Running deep and silent

Full of expectation we steamed out of Tobermory's natural harbour the following morning and headed along the Sound towards Oban. The depth readings on our sounders were amazing, 200ft no distance from the shore and almost twice that in some of the more cavernous holes. Getting a dinghy anchor down in that depth was going to be interesting!

Brian had given us a string of angling options. We could have headed out to the open sea and fished a mark off Caliach Point but with freshening conditions it was probably not the place to be in a small boat, nor was another skate mark directly off Ardnamurchan.

Word had got to us that a group of eight Kent/Sussex anglers fishing aboard Laurencia, skippered now by Andy Jackson, had taken 17 skate over six days from inshore waters the week before, and that's where we set up our stall.

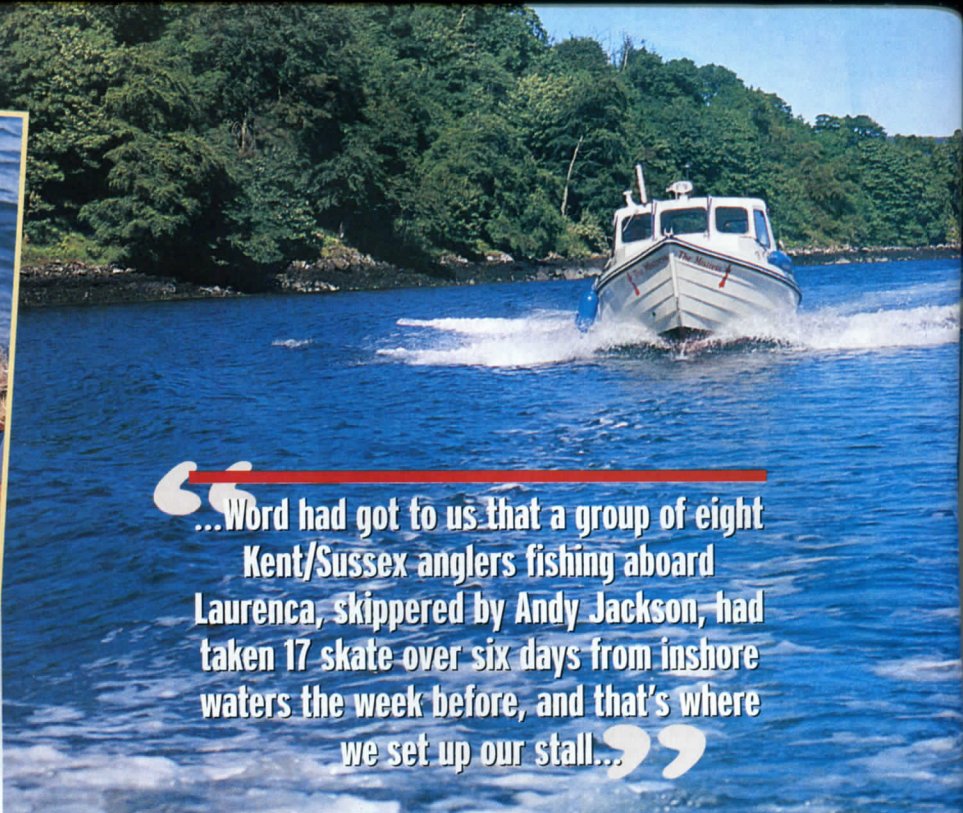
Was it just a matter of coincidence that trip organiser Chris Solomon contributes to sister magazine Boat Angler? Did he know something we didn't? Were we too late? Too early. Wrong tide? Anyway his

Right: Working for baitfish close to An Acairisd

Inset: The Classic fishfinder reads 219ft - a long way down!

I FINALLY SEE A SKATE

● I sort of got a skate in the end. During a farewell dinner with Brian and Duncan Swinbanks, the two pranksters presented me with a parcel. "A sort of late 50th birthday present," they said. It turned out to be a picture of a huge skate hooked alongside Brian's old boat Laurencia. Thank you boys but I am coming back for the real thing... stinking baits or not!



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party had hit the jackpot, so why shouldn't we follow in their footsteps?

With sounders feeding back information we looked for around 250ft of water opposite the fish farm on the Isle of Mull shore. Brian had briefed us to look for a stepped shelving bottom and we had no trouble spotting it on screen. The next big problem was could we anchor it? And the next was could we stand the smell of the bait much longer?

One anchor warp wasn't enough so I joined on another huge length of rope and gently let it out over the bow roller. I noticed our buddy boat, Mistress, skippered by Chris Martin doing the same thing. As I watched I looked with envy at his lifting buoy... I was to later wish I had one aboard.

Sea Angler, the bright yellow 16ft plus Orkney, finally anchored steady in 222ft of water, give ten feet or so, and we set to the task of catching a skate. Kit was nothing fancy, a four foot wire trace crimped to a 10/0 O'Shaughnessy hook with a big-eyed swivel at the other end tied direct to 50lb mainline.

A simple zip slider held around a pound

of lead and doubled up with the now 'rich' pollack baits weighing around 3lb apiece, it felt a pretty ungainly load going down, down, down to the sea bed.

Lowering gear was Penn Senator 4/0 or equivalent reels, while rods were either 50lb Shakespeare Ugly Sticks or Penn Stand-ups, both equally capable of giving Sid Skate, as they had become known, that lifting feeling.

Our first attempts at anchoring were amateurish. With so much warp out and the tide changing, we swung to close to each other - in fact, we were fishing each other's ground! I had the lighter boat, so we hauled anchor. Hell, what a job!

We found it easiest to open the forehatch, and with my better half, Tina, up front, hauled as a team to get the many hundreds of feet of rope up on deck... and with the glorious June sun beating down we began to get a little heady on the smell of the bait.

In another nightmare scenario, Tina reeled in and thought she had fouled bottom.



The Classic fishfinder reads 219ft - a long way down



Triumphant! Ken Lloyd beat this 130-pounder after fouling three other lines



the fly boys ...but there was better to come! In line astern steamed a whole flotilla of French minesweepers. It seemed NATO were flexing their muscles in Scottish waters!

Tina, who much prefers angling action, got out the bucket and cloth and started to do the housework and within half an hour the boat looked sparkling clean. I sat at the wheel and scrolled through the Eagle fish-finder and GPS systems familiarising myself with the various functions. God, this Scottish skating really keeps you on your toes.

By now the bait was honking and the hourly ritual of hauling up a glassy-eyed bait in over 200ft of water was becoming a chore. It wasn't that really, but delving into the fish box for a 'fresh' bait was beginning to turn my stomach!

To be frank, skate must have a queer taste in the food line if they prefer a middling pollack that's so rotten that its guts are beginning to fall away from its body. The thought of fishing around the bait box and shoving a big hook through a decomposing pollack's head isn't the thing you want just before you tackle your packed lunch!

The day crawled by, a few strap conger chewing the deep-water baits and then it was back to the slip. Which pub was it to be tonight? The Mishnish, right on the quay, seemed a good idea. It was a shame the boys from the Tartan Army were lagering up

though - their glassy eyes and unsure gait a true testament to their ability to sink untold pints of Tenants.

These were the heady days before the boys in blue and white were sent home for an early bath after failing to take the spirit of Braveheart to the football fields of France.

Giving her kit some real welly she began to gain line - then we noticed Mistress slowly coming towards us! She had neatly hooked the other boat's anchor rope and was towing a ton and a bit of boat towards her.

The hours ticked by... without a touch. I think we had earned the haggis, neaps and shot of whisky that went down the hatch that night!

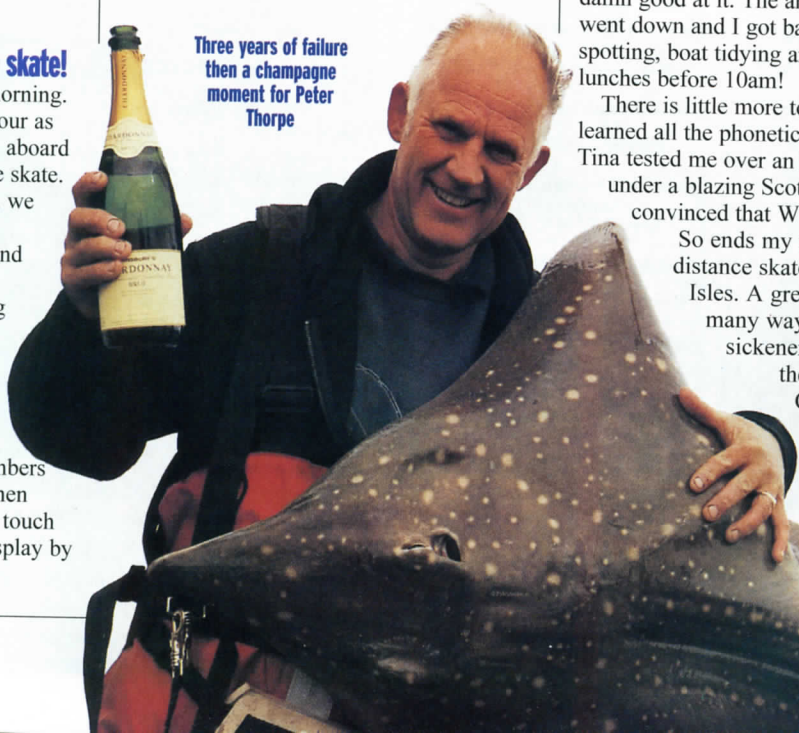
A skate, a skate, my wallet for a skate!

A glassy sea greeted us the next morning. Mistress was at anchor in the harbour as we ferried out kit, food and bodies aboard Sea Angler for another crack at the skate.

Still keen to fish the same mark, we returned and used our new found anchoring skills to get it right second time around and settled down for another day's exciting skate fishing Scottish style.

The sun began to burn, we dozed, I occasionally scanned the beautiful surrounding country with my binoculars, then instinctively ducked! Three Tornado fighter bombers came screaming down the Sound then wheeled round and round trying to touch each other's tails. A great aerial display by

Three years of failure then a champagne moment for Peter Thorpe



THE SKATE SQUADS SCORE

- The eight-man skate squad who had caught all our fish had a four point mission during their week-long stay in Tobermory - to release everything they caught, get a skate on Peter Thorpe's line after three years of failure, catch a ray on a Friday and break the skate record.
- They didn't catch a record-breaker but Peter caught his skate and the Friday duck was broken with Ken Lloyd bagging a 130lb male after skilfully playing it with three other lines twisted around his gear.
- Mike Chapman was crowned champion by scoring four hits, three over to 100lb, the best 170lb. Civil engineer Graham Furness from Hastings scored a well-deserved second with five skate to 122lb, while Matt Styles took two fish to 112lb.
- Ken Lloyd had the 130 and a 112 to go with it, Chris Solomon hauled up a 105lb male and a baby of 30lb and Peter Thorpe bagged a first ever skate. It weighed 40lb, and Graham Goodwin hooked a female of 32lb. Alan Harding was too busy videoing and he lost his only take of the week... I know how he feels!

Skate or bust... and it was bust!

I had a terrible feeling of foreboding as I walked down to the boat the following morning. I just didn't feel lucky and you need a little touch of lady luck when it comes to fishing.

Out we steamed again, we had two little boats with our festering cargos of rotting skate baits which surely must have laid the best scent trail in the world. Anchor cables slipped from bow rollers for the last time in a final last ditch stand to catch a big *raja*.

It was the same old drill, the only difference being we were getting pretty damn good at it. The anchors held, the baits went down and I got back to dozing, bird spotting, boat tidying and eating the packed lunches before 10am!

There is little more to tell, other than I learned all the phonetic A to Z symbols after Tina tested me over an hour-long period under a blazing Scottish sun. I'm still not convinced that W is for whisky!

So ends my tail of the long-distance skate trip to the Western Isles. A great experience in many ways... but a bit of a sickener when I returned to the office to find that Chris Solomon and all his mates had lifted so many of 'my' skate from Tobermory waters ■