

Island Conversations ...

Jim McFarlane, Jim Brown and Gus Newman on fishing and whisky

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Jim McFarlane

Oral historian, **Anna Greenwood**, explores the water of life on Islay and Jura

Photographs by **Paul Harris**

To the west of the Kintyre peninsular lies the island of Islay, set in the ocean with nothing between it and Canada but water. In an increasingly complex and fast-paced world, the simplicity of island life is alluring. Think of the Scottish isles, and whisky comes to mind. From the Gaelic *uisge beatha*, the word *whisky* literally means *water of life*. Islay's four thousand inhabitants are surrounded by water, and I'm interested in the people whose livelihoods are defined by the original water of life - the ocean. What is living here like for the fishermen and seafarers?

To find out, I take a short-break in my suitably slow and charming VW camper. On the itinerary are the freedom of wild camping and some good craic. I arrive at Port Askaig on Islay's sheltered east coast, two hours by ferry from Kennacraig. From the simple harbour, a single road draws steeply upwards, passing a handful of fishing boats, the pub, a small store and a petrol pump.

Jim McFarlane, Retired Fisherman and Boat Builder

Port Ellen on the south side of Islay is home to retired fisherman and boat builder Jim McFarlane. His family has lived here for generations.

“This is a painting of an Irish yawl,” he says of a picture we pass in the entrance of his sea-front home. “Our family came here two-hundred years ago in those, hand lining for cod.

“It's all scallop, crab and lobster fishing now. When I was younger it was all lobster, and we packed them in bracken in tea chests. You could send them from here on the first boat out in the morning and they were in Billingsgate at four o'clock the following morning. A cheque came by post before the end of the week. But very often the chests were pilfered.”

These days you can see the live catches being packed into trucks on the pier in Port Ellen every Sunday evening, from where they go direct to Spain for the Thursday live market.

Jim Brown, Crab Fisherman

Depending on the winds and tides, young Jim Brown can be seen fishing out of Port Ellen or Bowmore (speak to a local to hear their mellifluous pronunciation). He catches brown and velvet crab.

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To view the full article, contact Anna Greenwood

Photographs can be supplied.