THE ISLE OF MULL

About the Author

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He holds a Master of Arts degree (with Distinction) in Lake District Studies, and is a Doctor of Philosophy in Historical Geography, both from Lancaster University. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (Scotland), and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Terry first visited Mull more than 20 years ago, and has been returning regularly ever since.

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THE ISLE OF MULL

by
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But, of course, special thanks are due to my wife, Vivienne, who kept me fed, watered, motivated and dry during our weeks on Mull, while I was researching and writing the book. And Teal, our dog, tested many a bog, and swam or paddled in everything that resembled a lake or a river.

Front cover: Islands and skerries south of Ulva, viewed from Ormaig

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Route symbols on OS map extracts

route

route variant

start point

finish point

start/finish point

direction of walk

For OS symbols key see OS maps


Loch Sunart
Lochaline
Sound of Mull
Tobermory
A848
Loch Frisa
Salen
Loch Ba
Craignure
ISLE OF MULL
Firth of Lorn
Lochbuie
A849
Loch Scridain
Dervaig
Loch na Keal
Ulva
Ross of Mull
Loch Tuath
Gometra
Fionnphort
Iona
Erraid
N
0
10 mile
0
16km

PREFACE

I don't know when I first visited Mull; certainly it was more than 20, or even 25, years ago. I have been visiting the Inner Hebrides, notably Skye, for over 40 years. For sure, it was during the courtship years of my love affair with Scottish islands, a time when I was receptive to a whole litany of moods, impressions, atmospheric nuances (that is, abrupt and unpleasant weather changes), cultural differences and the sort of free-range possibilities that later led to a book about all the Scottish islands. One thing is certain, it was the superb writing of Jim Crumley, first about Skye and then in *The Heart of Mull*, that was a catalyst, completely changing the way I saw and understood what I was looking at. I met Jim once, on Beinn Ime above Loch Lomond – he was coming down as I was going up. We chatted briefly, and it turned out we had friends in common. Little did I know then how much his writing would influence my own way of thinking.

So, after three editions of my guide to walking on Skye, it was time to turn my attention to Mull and its islands. And what a joy it has been. Like Skye, Mull has the full range of walking country. There is clearly less of the craggy stuff that you get in the Cuillin but anyone who loves walking on islands, where the sea is always somewhere in view, will enjoy what Mull has to offer, and be surprised by the diversity and richness of this magnificent landscape.

For the walker, whatever his or her fitness, Mull is a great walking destination, offering easy routes to draw you in and then, on longer but no less enjoyable walks, putting you in your place as you struggle with some of its difficulties. Here you can enjoy long and lonely days among the hills or wandering the coastline, often on splendid raised beaches. Or simply potter along shorter walks, or amble through forests, enjoying the natural history for which Mull is renowned.

This book was written while staying at a former shepherd's cottage in Glen Forsa, with Highland cattle frequently grazing at the gate or scratching their heads on the gate posts, red deer passing by the door, hen harriers out for lunch, and, far from city lights, night-time views of the Milky Way as clear as could be. Yesterday the light up the glen was amazing, and the walk to its head below Beinn Talaidh quite superb. Today it's all I can do to see the chaffinches feeding on the nuts on the garden. These extremes are what I find so fascinating about Mull. You get them almost anywhere in Britain, but there is something soothing about Mull, something that makes you want to be out, in the heart of Mull, getting beneath its skin…it's not unusual to see people of all ages standing by the roadside just looking, mesmerised, as if they have never seen a landscape quite this one.

But so changeable is Mull that you can never experience it all in one visit; you will simply have to come back, often and again.

Terry Marsh

Glen Aros and distant view of Loch Frisa (Walk 1.16)

INTRODUCTION

An t-Eilean Muileach, an t-eilean aghmhor,
An t-Eilean grianach mu'n iath an saile,
Eilean buadhmhor nam fuar bheann arda,
Nan coilltean uaine, 's cluaintean fasail.

The Isle of Mull, of Isles the fairest,
Of ocean's gems 'tis the first and rarest;
Green grassy island of sparkling fountains,
Of dark green woods and tow'ring mountains.
Dugald MacPhail (An t'Eilean Muileach)

With a diversity of land forms unequalled by any other Scottish island, Mull is a place of wild beauty: untamed, rugged and never uninteresting. Great swathes of Mull are approachable only on foot, and while there are roads (240km/150 miles of them), the abiding impression is that they are incidental, in a very minor way, to life on the island.

Separated from the Scottish mainland by the Sound of Mull and the Firth of Lorn, Mull, with an area of just under 90,000 hectares, is the


Calgary Bay (Walk 1.9)

third largest of the Hebridean islands (unless you want to play the pedant and claim that the larger Skye is no longer an island because someone built a bridge linking it with the mainland). With a coastline deeply penetrated by a ragged 480km (300 miles) of sea lochs and inlets that reward the visitor with constantly changing views, Mull is an island of delight and considerable variety. Indeed, it is the coastline that vies with the mountain heartlands as the island's most outstanding feature, offering towering cliffs and sandy bays, basalt columns and pink granite crags.

Geologically, Mull's origins are violently volcanic, but dramatised in such a complex evolution that the island is the stuff of dreams for geologists. The visiting walker soon comes to realise that it is this underlying foundation, the bones of the island, that provides a landscape both varied and demanding, blessed with considerable beauty and diversity. High (and not-so-high) mountains, remote glens, coastal paths along raised beaches, forest walks and island treks make Mull one of the most resourcefull of the Scottish islands for the walker. Although a great deal of the coastline is rugged and rocky, in the south-west there are splendid beaches of glistening shell sand set against machair lands and sheltered crofting communities.

Like much of western Scotland, especially the islands, Mull has seen its share of that shadowy period in Scottish history known as 'the Clearances', but on Mull, the story of depopulation is not as clear-cut as elsewhere. Surprisingly, perhaps, for an island so close to mainland Scotland, Mull is relatively undeveloped, with few of the 'town' facilities and services of Oban. You come to Mull to escape and to enjoy its fundamental simplicity, for that is its charm. And the exploration of the winding narrow roads, all of them feeding into heathered and loch-filled glens, is the island's greatest pleasure.

As the eagle flies, Mull stretches 44.5km (28 miles) from Ardmore Point in the north to Rudh' Ardalanish in the south, and 49km (30 miles) from Duart Point in the east to the coast overlooking Iona in the west. But such statistics are meaningless in this contorted landscape. At its narrowest, Mull is a mere 4.25km (2½ miles) from Salen Bay to Killiechronan. Around the coast lie numerous islands, for Mull is not so much one island as an island group; some – Ulva, Gometra, Erraid and Iona – have interest for walkers. Others – Treshnish Isles and Staffa – are the stuff of legend, and popular on the tourist and wildlife trails. But Mull and its islands are not a place to be consumed in haste. Even visitors with the most basic interest in matters of natural history will find themselves stopping by the roadside to peer at seals, otters, deer, and the birds of the air.

It is a far cry from the scene that greeted Dr Johnson, who visited the

island in October 1773, admittedly on a drab day, and remarked that Mull was 'a dreary country, much worse than Sky…a most dolorous country!'. His companion Boswell, however, seems to have been rather more discerning, describing the island as 'a hilly country, diversified with heath and grass, and many rivulets'.

Such opposing views of Mull may well be typical; much depends on the eye of the beholder. But even on the gloomiest of days, the beauty of Mull will out, and the rewards for patience and persistence are memories that will last a lifetime and a joy that will make the heart ache.

HISTORY

The history of Mull is not well documented, and there has been no attempt by anyone to write a full history of the island, except for a two-volume work by J P Maclean, published in America in 1922. Those volumes were essentially anthological, based on published works at the time and not on research in original material. Jo Currie's book *Mull: The Island and its People*, published in 2000, is excellent for detailed information about the history of the families and clans of the island (and its islands), but is not an authoritative treatise on island history. Numerous lesser publications

Standing stones, Glen Gorm (Walk 1.4)

and information on the internet give potted histories of Mull, but a definitive work by a professional historian is long overdue.

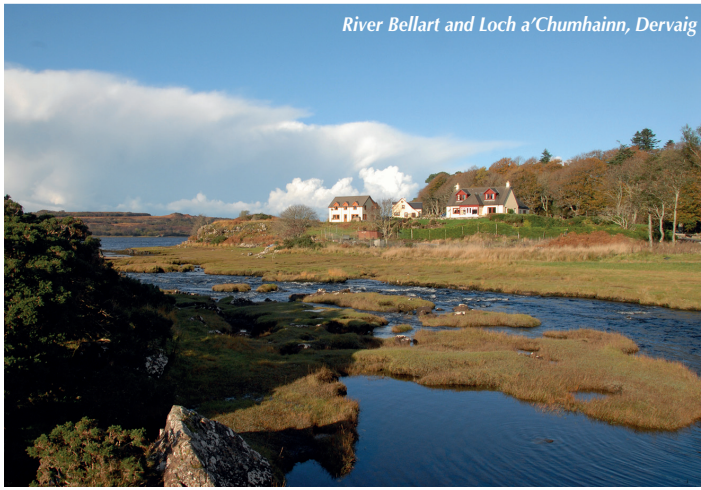
It is generally believed that Mull was first inhabited about 8000–10,000 years ago, following the last Ice Age. Hunter-gatherers lived in caves, such as the so-called Livingston's Cave on Ulva, and roamed freely across the island group. Then came the great transition, when the nomadic people started to settle down and become farmers, as they did throughout Britain and much of Europe, anything up to 6000 years ago. These Neolithic people, and the Bronze Age people that followed them, were responsible for many of the burial cairns that still dot the islands. Their presence is attested by a wealth of such cairns, cists, standing stones, stone circles, beaker pottery and knife blades. The Iron Age people who lived on Mull from around 2500–1500 years ago built forts, brochs, duns and crannogs, and a great many defensive settlements across the islands.

Christianity is believed to have come to the islands in the sixth century, when Columba landed from Ireland on the southernmost point of Iona, and set up a monastery on the island. But within a century, the island of Iona was sacked by Vikings, who continued to raid the islands of Mull for several centuries before becoming settlers.

In the 14th century, Mull became part of the Lordship of the Isles, but after the collapse of the Lordship in 1493, the island was taken over by the Clan MacLean, who were to suffer for their support of the Royalist cause during the Commonwealth and later for their Jacobite tendencies. Their dispossessed lands were awarded to the Campbells, the Dukes of Argyll, and although they tried to encourage industry in Mull, without much success, financial problems forced them to part with their Mull lands by the mid-19th century.

The clan system, however, was always important, and following the end of the 15th century, virtually all the inhabitants lived within the clan system, a complex social hierarchy within which the clan chief held the land in trust for his clansmen, who were in turn bound to him in ties of kinship. This way of life was largely pastoral, founded on breeding cattle, which was the only form of wealth that could be liquidated by export to the mainland. Many of the routes taken by the cattle drovers across the island can still be followed today, virtually all of them leading to the lovely setting of Grasspoint near Craignure from where the beasts were taken to the island of Kerrera and onward to the mainland.

As with many of the Scottish islands, Mull suffered its share of grief under the so-called Highland Clearances, and it would be temptingly incorrect to assume that all the houses found derelict by the roadside are the by-product of the Clearances; in fact, many of the houses were


River Bellart and Loch a'Chumhainn, Dervaig

still inhabited in the 20th century. Evidence of the Clearances is, however, found all over the islands. Twenty crofters and three townships were cleared in Mishnish in the north of the island in 1842. Glengorm suffered hugely at the hands of James Forsyth, with wholesale clearances of crofts and townships. Four centres were cleared in Calgary in 1822, while in Treshnish three townships were cleared in 1862. Ulva and Gometra saw arguably the most extensive destruction when 100 people were evicted between 1846 and 1851, and were soon followed by the remaining inhabitants of the islands.

The main settlement on Mull today is Tobermory, which in 1788 was built by the British Fisheries Society, as a planned settlement. Over the centuries Mull's population increased, reaching 10,638 in 1831, but the potato famine and then the Clearances rapidly reduced this number. By the 20th century much of the population had emigrated and there were more sheep on Mull than people.

Today Mull and its neighbouring islands have a population of fewer than 3000. Farming, fishing and forestry used to be the economic mainstays of the island, but increasingly, tourism is responsible for much of the island economy.

GEOLOGY

If the history of Mull is not very well documented, the island's geology is quite the opposite, and its geological

WALK 1.1

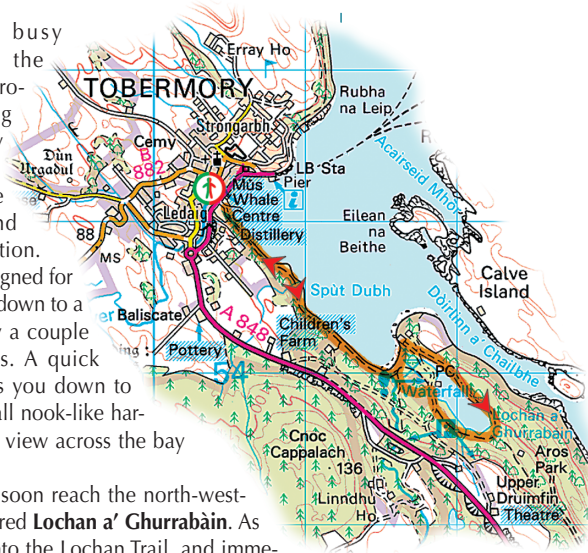
Tobermory and Aros Park

Start/Finish	Tobermory car park (NM 505 551)
Distance	5.5km (3½ miles)
Total ascent	90m (295ft)
Terrain	Woodland and lakeside paths
Map	OS Explorer 374 Isle of Mull North and Tobermory

Aros Park is a green lung for Tobermory, not that it needs it, given the breezy ozone that permanently mantles the town. But this sometime estate park, now owned by the Forestry Commission, is linked to Tobermory for good reason: it is the perfect place to explore a managed estate woodland, to enjoy the ornamental lake carpeted with water lilies, and to harvest a bounty of brambles in season. The woodlands are rich and lush with ash, rowan, hazel, birch, beech, oak and various pine, as well as rhododendron, a tell-tale sign of a managed estate. Thick layers of moss cloak many of the trees, both living and long-since felled, while the understorey has a fine range of fungi later in the year. This walk is straightforward and uncomplicated.

Leave the car park by setting off along a path near the pub (signed 'Coastal Path to Aros Park'), climbing a little at the end of a cliff, then going forward along a terraced path with the sea down below to your left. Throughout the walk there are stands of oak, beech, birch, hazel, alder, rowan and a few lime.

Spùt Dubh (Black Spout), as its name suggests, is a waterfall, a once-important supply of fresh, albeit peat-stained, water for ships in years gone by. Beyond that, a landslide some years ago necessitated a little re-routing, but the path maintains a steady course above the waters of Tobermory Bay, with Calve Island riding at anchor off-shore, protecting the Tobermory harbour from east winds.



Where the busy **Aros Burn** meets the bay, a footbridge provides a fine viewing point for the nearby waterfall. Across the burn, take the left-hand path and soon reach a junction. Here, branch left (signed for the pier), and walk down to a T-junction close by a couple of sturdy buildings. A quick left turn here takes you down to the pier and its small nook-like harbour, with a lovely view across the bay to Tobermory.

Turn right and soon reach the north-western end of lily-covered **Lochan a' Ghurrabàin**. As you do, turn left onto the Lochan Trail, and immediately right to follow a gentle path all around the lake through mature woodland. At the far end of the lake, the path divides. Branch right, and, just on crossing a simple footbridge spanning a stream (with a dilapidated pump house nearby) flowing from the distant Lochan na Guailne Duibhe away to the south-east, keep right, still on the Lochan Trail.

When the path next divides, take the left-hand branch, walking up to a large car park and picnic area. This spot may be reached more directly – to effect a shorter walk, or for that matter a picnic – by leaving the A848 at NM 509 541, at Aros Lodge.

The car park is the site of **Aros House**, owned by the Allan family, shipowners from Liverpool, who were resident here from 1874 until 1959. The gardens were planted by Alexander Allan, who tended the estate with great care and lived the life of a respectable country gentleman. By the 1950s, the estate had become a financial drain, and the Forestry Commission bought

Lochan a' Ghurrabàin, Aros Park

the land but had no use for the house, which was sold on and later stripped of its oak panelling and lead roofing. In time, left as a shell, the house became a danger and the army demolished it in 1962.

Cross the car park, heading towards a small toilet block, just past which you find another path taking you back among the trees. This path, too, soon divides. Go left, climbing gently, and quickly arrive at a T-junction with the Aros Burn a few strides in front of you, and the lower **waterfall** and footbridge a short distance down to your right. If you want to extend the walking a little, then at the T-junction you can turn left and walk up beside the burn, crossing a main trail, and continuing to the upper waterfall. There are linking paths to get you back on line, but the simplest expedient is to return to the lower waterfall.

Cross the footbridge, and retrace your steps to **Tobermory**.

WALK 1.2

Rubha nan Gall

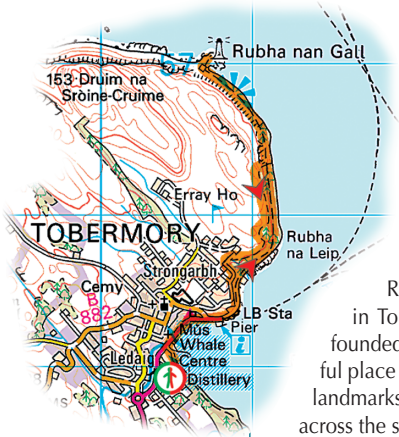
Start/Finish	Tobermory car park (NM 505 551)
Distance	5.2km (3¼ miles)
Total ascent	180m (590ft)
Terrain	Woodland paths across steep slope; golf course
Map	OS Explorer 374 Isle of Mull North and Tobermory

The brightly coloured houses of Tobermory are a delightful prelude to this mainly woodland walk to the lighthouse at Rubha nan Gall, the Headland of the Stranger. Although you can simply return the same way, there is an agreeable alternative that climbs up onto the headland and then treks around the edge of Tobermory's lumpy but beautiful golf course.

Tobermory, the main town on Mull, takes its name from the well and chapel of St Mary, although no-one seems to know precisely where (somewhere below the cemetery) the well is located. What remains of the chapel is found in the old part of the cemetery. The town was established in 1788 by the British Fisheries Society, although fishing never prospered here, in spite of the sheltered nature of the bay.

Walk to the far end of Tobermory, to the ferry point, and look for a path rising on the left just after the last building. This climbs easily, and soon wanders into light woodland, and then by a generally level path through a tunnel of trees around the edge of the bay.

At NM 511 565, the track divides. You will return to this point, but for now bear right and follow an improving, but sometimes muddy, path that suddenly breaks free of the woodland. Now, cross a steep slope covered with



heather, bracken, gorse and birch, with a lovely view across the Sound of Mull to Ardnamurchan. Soon, the lighthouse at **Rubha nan Gall** comes into view, seemingly hunkered down among the rocks, until you get closer and see that it lies at the end of a small pier.

Just before reaching the light, there are steps on the right down to a memorial viewpoint, commemorating Robert John Brown, who lived close by in Tobermory, and whose father, Archibald, founded Browns shop in Tobermory. This is a useful place to spend a few minutes identifying distant landmarks, not least the squat triangle of Ben Hiant across the sound.

Press on along a clear path to reach the former lighthouse keepers' cottages at Rubha nan Gall and the lighthouse, first lit in 1857, and automated in the 1960s. Going further, beyond the light, takes you into difficult terrain, and is not advised.

Lighthouse, Rubha nan Gall

Tobermory

Northwards lies so-called **Bloody Bay**, where in 1480 a great sea battle took place between John, the last Lord of the Isles, and his son Angus. On that day the tide came ashore red with blood. And, as Jim Crumley explains in *The Heart of Mull*, so it is that the oyster-catcher owes its red beak and legs to its forebears who waded along the shore on that fateful day.

Retrace your steps to the point where the path divided, and there turn right, climbing easily through the woodland to reach its upper rim at an iron fence stanchion. Here turn left, pursuing a pleasant path above the upper limit of the woodland, undulating gently upwards through bracken to reach a step-stile at the edge of Tobermory **golf course**.

Cross the stile and keep left, following the manicured edges of the golf course, a splendid experience when stray golf balls are not flying in your direction. Keep on, with lovely views of Calve Island, until a path takes you away from the course edge, descending for a while, but then emerging back onto the golf course edge. Continue

beyond the fifth green, and then ultimately the fifth tee, after which a path leads to an iron gate in a corner.

Through the gate you enter a neck of woodland, and in a few strides turn left to follow a clear path round the edge of Bad-Daraich house to a road head at **Oakfield** (NM 509 555). Now turn left, and when you reach the **war memorial**, turn left beside it, taking a descending path and steps that lead to the path used at the start of the walk. Turn right to return to the edge of Tobermory at the Calmac pier.

SUNKEN TREASURE

Those who enjoy a good yarn may find appeal in the story that an Armada galleon carrying untold treasure was destroyed close by the pier in 1588, and that great wealth, if you can find it, lies deep in the silt of the bay. There are numerous versions of the story, and of the 'detail' of how the galleon was blown up just as it was readying to sail. The most charming is that the Witch of Lochaber, engaged by Lady Maclean of Duart Castle to retrieve her husband from the attentions of a beautiful Spanish princess on board the galleon, called up an army of fairy cats, which swam out and savaged the crew. One, in pursuing a sailor, set off loose powder in the magazine with sparks from its fur, and so destroyed the galleon. While there can be little doubt that such a tale is perfectly true, Alison MacLeay gives an alternative version in *The Tobermory Treasure*, to which contemporary thinking ascribes greater veracity. The wreck was long thought to have been the man-of-war, the *Florencia*, but was, in fact, a Mediterranean carrack, the *San Juan de Sicilia*.

Ardmore Bay