

Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 9 August 2005

Whirlpools are a natural phenomenon that can be seen in all sorts of places; at one end of the scale is the vortex created as the last of the bath water runs away: at the other end is the awesome power of major whirlpools in the sea.

The largest one is generally reckoned to be the Moskstraumen whirlpool off the Lofoten Islands near Norway; at its height it can reach speeds of up to nearly 28 km per hour. Close behind is 'Old Sow' between New Brunswick in Canada and Maine, then Naruto off Japan. At this level of power they are more correctly called maelstroms.

Scotland has its fair share of whirlpools. The best known has to be Corryvreckan in the channel between North Jura and the island of Scarba. Although much less powerful than the likes of Moskstraumen, it is still dangerous and to be feared when it reaches its 20 km per hour. George Orwell, of 1984 fame, almost drowned along with his son, nephew and niece, when his boat was sucked into Corryvreckan. Barnhill, George Orwell's house, overlooks the channel and it would have been a familiar sight to him during his time on Jura.

Whirlpools are caused by a combination of tide and undersea geography. In the case of Corryvreckan, there is a large steep pinnacle of rock rising from a depth of 70m to just 29m in the middle of the Sound of Jura. When the tide hits both the narrowing channel and this major obstacle the outcome is a rapid upwelling of water. The resulting whirlpool can be heard for up to 10 miles away; the Royal Navy considers that the Sound of Jura is one of the most dangerous stretches of water in Britain.

Recently, there has been considerable research carried out into the possibility of harnessing the power of the tidal stream to produce electricity; the potential is for around 2GW. This would be a valuable addition to the renewable energy produced here in Scotland if the challenges of actually building it could be overcome.

The Pentland Firth is another risky area for shipping. As well as tidal races, horrendous seas, skerries, rocks and headlands to trap the unwary there is also the Swelchie, a whirlpool that appears under certain conditions of wind and tide off the coast of Stroma. Although far from being in the same league as Corryvreckan, the Swelchie has nevertheless taken its toll on small vessels over the years. There was a superstition among fishermen that if they were caught in the Swelchie they should sacrifice goods onboard to appease its wrath; however, as this extract from a poem commemorating a 19th century wreck shows, there are no guarantees when dealing with nature.

“.....
*But vainly oars, and masts, and sails,
And jackets and vests were spent;
The boat stood up, as it were, on end,
And down with a plunge she went.*

*The Swelchie closed above its prey
With a splash and a sullen roar;
Nor wreck, nor rag, nor corpse of man,
Has ever been cast to shore...”*

Like most other phenomena, there is local folklore surrounding it. The story is that there were two giantesses named Fenia and Menia, who were bond-maids to Frodi, a cruel Danish king. He kept them constantly turning Grotti, a magic quernstone that was able to grind whatever it was asked to. His cruelty drove the two women to secretly grind out an army to

free them from slavery. Frodi was killed and they fled with a sea-rover called Mysing. Mysing asked them to grind out some salt in the Pentland Firth, but they ground so much that the boat sank near Stroma. At the bottom of the Firth, Grotti still grinds salt to this day, creating the Swelchie and keeping the sea salt.

With MRI's Harbour Festival just over a week away on Sunday 21st August, it feels a bit like being in a whirlpool here as all the last minute tasks are tackled. The Festival will be a family day out with demonstrations both in the water and on land, entertainment, trampolines, climbing wall, stalls selling everything from fresh vegetables to jewellery, and the usual teas and burgers. Donations of home bakes, bottles or help on the day would be very gratefully received. Then all we need is the sunshine.

Visit www.maritime-rescue-institute.org to find out more about us.

Your online shopping can support MRI also; log onto www.buy.at/mri

For further information or to get involved with MRI as a volunteer, please contact 01569 765768 or email hamish.mcdonald@btconnect.com.