

MALLAIG

HIGHLAND



You can tell a lot about a harbour by listening to the VHF traffic as you approach. How quickly the controller answers, the friendliness in their voice and how the radio users address each other – e.g. using ‘sir’ or ‘madam’. At Mallaig it was exemplary, and I had a good feeling as I waited for the ferry to depart and the harbour lights to go green. What I did not realise was that I would have a gun put to my head in the HM’s office and be given free langoustines.

Mallaig’s history is unusual, with the harbour built before the town was established. With huge foresight the local laird, Lord Lovat, commissioned the building of the first pier in 1846. He wanted to create jobs for local people made destitute by the potato famine. By the 1880s the second west coast herring boom was fully underway and up to 700 small boats from all over the Highlands were fishing nearby lochs Nevis and Hourn. At that time most of the fish were cured aboard larger Dutch and English boats (busses), something that was repeated 100 years later when the fish were processed aboard Russian and Eastern European Klondyker fleets. Think of Russian character Victor in the film *Local Hero* which was shot nearby.

The arrival of the railway in 1901 (including the Harry Potter train viaduct at Glenfinnan) put Mallaig on the map and to this day a steam train arrives twice a day in the town, nearly doubling the local population for a few hours. With a land transport link to Fort William, and ferry services to Skye and the Outer Hebrides, the town boomed again with fish being transported direct to Glasgow and London.

In the harbour office I was welcomed by a whole team of people. As well as the Harbour Master, Pimmy (James) McLean, I was lucky enough to meet the CEO of the Harbour Authority, Jacqueline McDonnell. However, before we could chat I had to be shot in the head by the office manager, Audrey McKay, whose voice I had heard on the radio a little earlier. It was COVID time and she had to take my temperature with a heat gun before I was deemed a ‘safe’ visitor.



Audrey McKay, Mallaig Harbour office manager, ‘shoots’ me

Pimmy was a Mallaig fisherman for 35 years before becoming HM in 2000, so he had a huge amount of knowledge and experience of this fickle industry. Fewer young people are becoming commercial fishers and he explained why: buying a boat can cost between £1m to £3m and with it you need a licence, £350k is a typical amount. Then you need to understand the quota system, regulations about species, size and bycatch, all before you apply the ever-changing EU Common Fisheries Policy, deal with Brexit regulations and cope with the lack of available crew. Suffice to say that when Pimmy started as Mallaig HM, it had 53 registered fishing boats, when I met him in 2020 it had just eight.



Douglas McLean, prawn creel fisherman

It was Jacqueline who explained the bigger picture to me. The harbour is a Trust Port, run and owned by its users and the community. Income is generated from several streams including 55 commercial vessels which pay to use the harbour. Fees are collected from the landing of £5m-worth of seafood as well as movements of salmon feed, building materials and livestock. Ferries sail to seven destinations, carrying 300,000 passengers and 80,000 vehicles per year, and 1,200 yachts use the fantastic marina. In addition, there are commercial lets including a Mowi salmon harvesting plant around which my crew had a tour. Here they process 60,000 salmon a night, hoovering live fish out of giant 'well boats' before they are killed and transported to Fort William by tanker lorry for gutting and, somewhat unbelievably, then loaded onto a flight to China.

250 staff are employed by wider harbour businesses which some clever economist has calculated adds £15m to the local economy (figure updated in 2023). Overseeing the business is a volunteer board of local professionals who guide the future of the harbour using a comprehensive masterplan, published on their website. It is a model example of a Trust Port in action.



A statue by Mark Rogers to depict the town's maritime heritage – the man points out to sea

In a stroke of fate, history has repeated itself for Mallaig with the current laird being an important benefactor. Sir Cameron Mackintosh, the world-famous theatrical producer, owns Nevis Estate and is landlord of part of the harbour. His vision has helped create one of the most spectacular marina shower blocks in the country, among much else.

On my way back from the harbour I chatted to Gena, who was running something that could have only happened during COVID, a shower booking rota. She told me she was Pimmy's cousin. Then, talking to a fisherman on the pontoon, I found out I was speaking to Pimmy's brother Douglas who offered my crew 32 creel-caught langoustines as his contribution to the charity. Not long after, electrician Bertie came on board to mend our VHF radio. You've guessed it, another relation of Pimmy's. You can see, I have a soft spot for this harbour.



60,000 salmon en route to China



Mallaig Harbour Authority comprises fishing boats, ferries, commercial vessels and a small marina