Strangford Lough, the 12M by 2M stretch of water enclosed by the Ards Peninsula, is the finest sheltered sailing area in Ireland, and in its geology and ecology is quite unique in Europe. In geological terms, it is drowned drumlin country, debris left by the glaciers of the last great Ice Age and inundated by the sea. The bottom is extremely irregular, here flat and muddy, there steep-to and rocky. The glacial boulder clay has been eroded by the sea, leaving only the boulders in layers upon the shore and in heaps below water; where these great natural cairns are hazards to navigation they are known as pladdies, the word being derived from the Old Norse for “flat island”. The west shore of the Lough, and the northern part of the Ards peninsula, fall within the commuter belt of greater Belfast, but the Lough has nevertheless a remote feel, and is ringed by small communities, each with its own distinctive character and charm; in keeping with that, there are no less than eleven sailing clubs on Strangford Lough, each one distinct in its aims and ambience.
Strangford Lough is simply a delight. The area is steeped in history, and the Lough is ringed by ancient castles and fine old houses. There was once a healthy export trade in farm produce from the small ports around the Lough, but now the only commercial traffic is the ferry which crosses the Narrows. The peaceful and uncrowded ambience of the Lough is treasured by all those who live around its shores and sail its waters, and its wildlife and underwater flora and fauna are diverse and often unique. The Lough is a Marine Nature Reserve; there are no fish farms and no large marina developments, and it is unlikely that there will ever be either.

Strangford Lough is connected to the sea by a channel three miles in length and half a mile wide though which the tide flows with considerable force, and is harnessed for power generation. Streams reach eight knots, with vigorous eddies of which the Routen Wheel is one of the only two named whirlpools in Ireland.

The North Channel coast of the Ards Peninsula is rocky and tideswept, with the fishing village of Portavogie, the resort town of Donaghadee, and the Copeland Islands at the entrance to Belfast Lough. The Lough is a busy commercial waterway and an important sailing centre, with large marinas at Bangor and Carrickfergus. Belfast Harbour itself now extends a welcome to leisure craft, with expanded marina facilities at Abercorn Basin, beside the city’s Titanic Quarter.

Further north is the ferry port of Larne, and the charming villages of Glenarm, Carnlough and Cushendall at the foot of the Glens of Antrim on a scenic and cliffbound coast. The rapid tides of the North Channel govern passage timing, and with good planning, fast passages are possible.

**Paper Charts**

SCS612 covers the whole coast described in this chapter. In terms of individual charts, AC2156 is indispensable for Strangford Lough and the Ards coast. AC2159, Strangford Narrows, is optional. AC1753 is essential for Belfast Lough or if exploring the Copelands. AC1752 is optional. AC2198 and 2199 cover the North Channel coast, and AC1237 is needed only if spending time in Larne Lough.

**Tides - Strangford Lough and Approaches**

Offshore, SE of the fairway buoy, the tide turns NE at HW Belfast +0200 and SW at HW Belfast –0600, running SW for almost 8 hours. In the Narrows, the in-going stream begins at HW Belfast –0400 and the outgoing at HW Belfast +0200, reaching a maximum rate of 8 knots at springs. There is only a 15-minute period of slack water at the turn, and the streams run at 3 knots within an hour either side of this. Rates W of Angus Rock and N of Bar Pladdy are less. Close N of Gowland Point on the E side there is a large circular eddy called the Routen Wheel, which can be dangerous for small craft at times. The streams begin to slacken above Strangford and Portaferry, and largely dissipate once the Lough opens up. Significant streams run through some of the channels in the Lough, notably Ringhaddy Sound and Ballydorn. Constant (Strangford and all of the Lough) +0145 Belfast, MHWS 3·8m, MHWN 3·1m, MLWN 0·8m, MLWS 0·4m.
The ebb tide against an onshore wind raises steep and dangerous seas at the entrance and for at least a mile out to sea. Even in calm conditions, the meeting of the ebb stream with the main body of water outside raises a confused sea. It is safe to enter at any stage on the flood, in almost any conditions, though a sharp chop may be encountered at half flood.

**Dangers**

**St Patrick's Rock** (dries about 3-1m), 2 cables E of Killard Point

**Rock with 1.2m, 1.3 cables offshore 2-5 cables W of St Patrick’s Rock**

**Bar Pladdy** (0-8m), 5 cables SSW of Ballyquintin Point

**Angus Rock**, in mid-channel 1M N of Killard Point. The summit of the rock is above-water but drying reefs extend for 5 cables S and 1 cable N of the light tower

**Pladdy Lug**, drying rock 4 cables WSW of Ballyquintin Point

The shores from the entrance to Rue Point at the narrows are foul with rocks and drying reefs on both sides, extending out to **Salt Rock** on the W side and **Gowland Rocks*** on the E. For details of rocks in the minor channels at the entrance, see text and plans.

**Routen Wheel**, whirlpool, close N of Gowland Point

**Walter Rocks**, dry 3-4m, 4 cables NW of Portaferry

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**Lights and Marks**

**Strangford Lough – entrance:**

**Strangford Fairway buoy**, RWVS L Fl 10s, AIS

**St Patrick’s Rock**, 9m red stayed perch, unlit

**Bar Pladdy buoy**, S Card Q(6)+LFl 15s

**Pladdy Lug**, white stone beacon, unlit

**Tail of Angus**, squat stone beacon, unlit

**Angus Rock**, white tower with red top, Fl R 5s 15m 5M

**Dogtail Point**, green perch Iso 4s 2m 5M

**Gowland Rocks**, white pillar with green top, Iso 4s 6m 5M (these two synchronised)

**Salt Rock**, white tower with red top Fl R 3s 8m 3M

**Seagen Tidal Generator**, black tower with two red bands, IDM Fl(2) 10s 10m

**Strangford and Portaferry harbours and approaches:**

**Swan Island beacon**, E Card Q(3) 10s

**South Pladdy**, pole beacon S Card VQ(6)+L Fl 10s

**Watch House Point Rock**, red pole QR 3m 3M

**Strangford East**, leading lights 256°, front Oc WRG 5s 6m W9M, R6M, G6M, R190°–244° G244°–252° W252°–260° R260°–294°. Rear Oc R 5s 10m 6M

**North Pladdy**, pole beacon, N Card Q

**Portaferry Marina breakwater**, Iso WRG 4s G320°–021° W021°–097° R097°–140°. Shows white over the approach from the W, green over the shallows to the S and red over the breakwater to the N

**Portaferry Marina entrance buoys**, (outer) SHM G 5s (inner) SHM, unlit. Three unlit Special Mark buoys delineate a speed limit area off the piers.

**Portaferry Pier**, orange mast OcWR 10s 9m W9M R6M, W335°–005° R005°–017° W017°–026°

**Church Point**, white pyramid beacon with red top, Fl(4) R 10s

**Ballyhenry Point**, white pillar with green top, QG 3M

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**STRANGFORD LOUGH ENTRANCE and NARROWS**

**SE.** 54°19’-1N 5°30’-5W, AC2156, 2159, SC5612

The ebb tide against an onshore wind raises steep and dangerous seas at the entrance and for at least a mile out to sea. Even in calm conditions, the meeting of the ebb stream with the main body of water outside raises a confused sea. It is safe to enter at any stage on the flood, in almost any conditions, though a sharp chop may be encountered at half flood.
in a strong northerly wind. Ideally it is best to avoid the last hour of the flood, so that one has time to complete the passage of the narrows before the ebb commences.

Because the tide runs at up to 8 knots, yachts normally leave on the ebb, and in offshore winds this does not present any problems. However it is dangerous to leave by the main channel in fresh or strong south-easterly winds on the ebb, because of the overfalls at the mouth. This should not be attempted. If bound south along the coast, it is possible to leave by the west channel in a fresher wind than would be safe by the main channel, but caution should be exercised.

In moderate onshore winds, departure should not be hazardous, but will certainly be uncomfortable where the ebb, especially at springs, meets the main body of water outside. The safest option is to leave at slack LW. If it is deemed unsafe to proceed, the first of the flood will carry the yacht back in. Also, the main channel may be avoided by using either the west channel or the passage north of Bar Pladdy.

An alternative is to leave within 15 minutes of slack HW; at this stage, the flood having run for six hours, the sea state at the mouth will be at its calmest. However, this course has the disadvantage that if conditions are unsuitable, it will be difficult to get back in against the strengthening ebb. It also requires well-judged timing; a yacht capable of 6 knots should take her departure from Audley’s Roads at HW Belfast +0100 against the last of the flood stream.

**Entering from the S**, St Patrick’s Rock may be left on either hand, but beware of the rock with 1-2m, close SE of Killard Point. **From the**

![Strangford entrance, seen from the shore at Kilclief with a strong southerly wind blowing against the ebb tide. Angus Rock beacon, upper L, and Tail of Angus beacon, R. Note how relatively calm the West Channel is](image-url)
N, the transit of St Patrick’s Rock perch with the beacon on Guns Island leads S of Quintin Rock. The main channel is well marked and lit, and at night the synchronised lights on Dogtail Point and Gowland Rocks provide a leading line east of Angus Rock. There are also navigable channels N of Bar Pladdy and W of Angus Rock. The key landmark for these channels is the church at Kilclief on the W shore, a tall, plain, grey barn-like building with a small bell-tower on its west gable (see photographs). Note that new survey information in 2013 has resulted in revised directions for these channels. In particular the transit of 320·5º on Kilclief Church, shown on existing charts, is no longer recommended. Near HW there is ample depth over the rocks, but near LW the transits must be strictly observed.

**Main Channel**

The main channel is bounded by Angus Rock to the W and by Bar Pladdy buoy and Pladdy Lug beacon to the E. From the S, do not turn in until Portaferry waterfront is visible E of Angus Rock. From Portavogie and the N, leave the Bar Pladdy buoy to starboard after rounding Ballyquintin Point. Give Pladdy Lug beacon a berth of at least half a cable. To avoid the Meadows shoal, keep Dogtail and Gowlands beacons in line 341º. Mid-channel is free of dangers from here until the Lough opens up. The tidal generator should be given a berth of half a cable and may be passed on either hand. The rotors extend for 21m on either side of the pillar and the blade tips are 4·1m under water at LAT. The rotors can be raised out of the water for maintenance;
this condition is obvious in daylight and is floodlit after dark, while a RIB patrols the area at these times.

**West Channel**

The passage W of the Angus Rock is less subject to the tide and tends to be much calmer in onshore winds against the tidal stream. It has a least depth of 3m; however it is unmarked and only a cable wide between rocks which almost dry at LAT. **From the S**, approach keeping the Tail of Angus beacon well open left of the Angus tower until Kilclief Church bears 314° (from waypoint WS 54°19′25″N 5°31′3″W, see photograph). On this bearing the bell gable of the church is in line with the dip in the skyline east of a pointed drumlin hill. Turn on to this transit, taking particular care to avoid being set off the transit line by the strong tidal stream. When the Tail of Angus beacon is well open to the right of the Angus tower (at WN 54°19′47″N 5°31′7″W) it is safe to turn to starboard. Give the Tail of Angus beacon a berth of 2 cables.

**Channel N of Bar Pladdy**

*B* 54°19′5″N 5°29′9″W

This channel also leads N of the Knob (1·1m) and a rock with 1·2m, 2 cables SSE of Pladdy Lug. The least depth on the transit line is 2·7m. Keep Kilclief Church in line with the Angus Rock tower 289°, with the east gable of the church just visible to the right of the tower, and pass at least half a cable W of the Pladdy Lug beacon (see photographs).

Take care to avoid being set off the transit line by the strong tidal stream, and in particular do not err to the south of the line.

**STRANGFORD**

*SD* 54°22′4″N 5°33′W, AC2156, 2159, SC5612. See photo on p82

The picturesque village of Strangford, on its bay on the W side of the Narrows, is sheltered
Strangford from the SE; Swan Island, centre R, the pier and ferry slip centre. The pontoon was built after this photograph was taken. The ferry’s track runs S of Swan Island; the spare ferry is on her mooring, R. Audley’s Roads, top.

Strangford; Swan Island beacon, L, the Seagen in the distance, centre, and North Pladdy beacon, R

Strangford pontoon. It is to be lengthened in 2014

by Swan Island and is the W terminus of the car ferry. The bay is just out of the main tidal stream and is subject to eddies which result in a N-going drift except for an hour either side of HW. Do not obstruct the ferry, and when manoeuvring take note of the way the moored boats are lying to the tide. The pools N and S of Swan Island have no room to anchor out of the tide and the ferry’s track, but there are three visitors’ moorings S of the island.

The pier has 5m on its E face and is the overnight berth of the ferry. There is 0·4m at the steps on the SE side of the pier. A pontoon extends N from the pier, with 2·6 to 3·6m alongside on its E side, and 1·6m on the W; this is to be preferred to the pier itself. Pontoon berth payment and gate code at Cuan Restaurant, 028 4488 1222. Water on the pier and pontoon; diesel by arrangement with Cuan Restaurant. Shops, PO, pubs, restaurants, ATM. Slip suitable for trailer sailors. Constant +0145 Belfast, MHWS 3·8m, MHWN 3·1m, MLWN 0·8m, MLWS 0·4m.
Portaferry is one of only two significant towns situated directly on the shores of the Lough. It is the E terminus of the ferry and has a 30-berth marina with a floating breakwater. The marina has 2.5m and the entrance faces S. Two green buoys, one of them lit, mark the limit of the dredged basin S of the breakwater. Approach steering between E and NE (or at night, in the white sector of the breakwater light) and leave the buoys to starboard. Beware of the strong cross tides; the depths decrease sharply, SE of the buoys. The stream runs strongly through the marina during the top half of the tide. Marina manager 028 4272 9598.

Showers at the marina or at Barholm Apartments, 200m; laundry facilities at Barholm. Water and shore power on the pontoons. Portaferry has shops, PO, pubs, restaurants, banks, ATMs, filling station and the fascinating Exploris aquarium. RNLI inshore lifeboat station.