

4 Ballycastle to Lough Swilly



Macamish Bay, the most beautiful anchorage in Lough Swilly

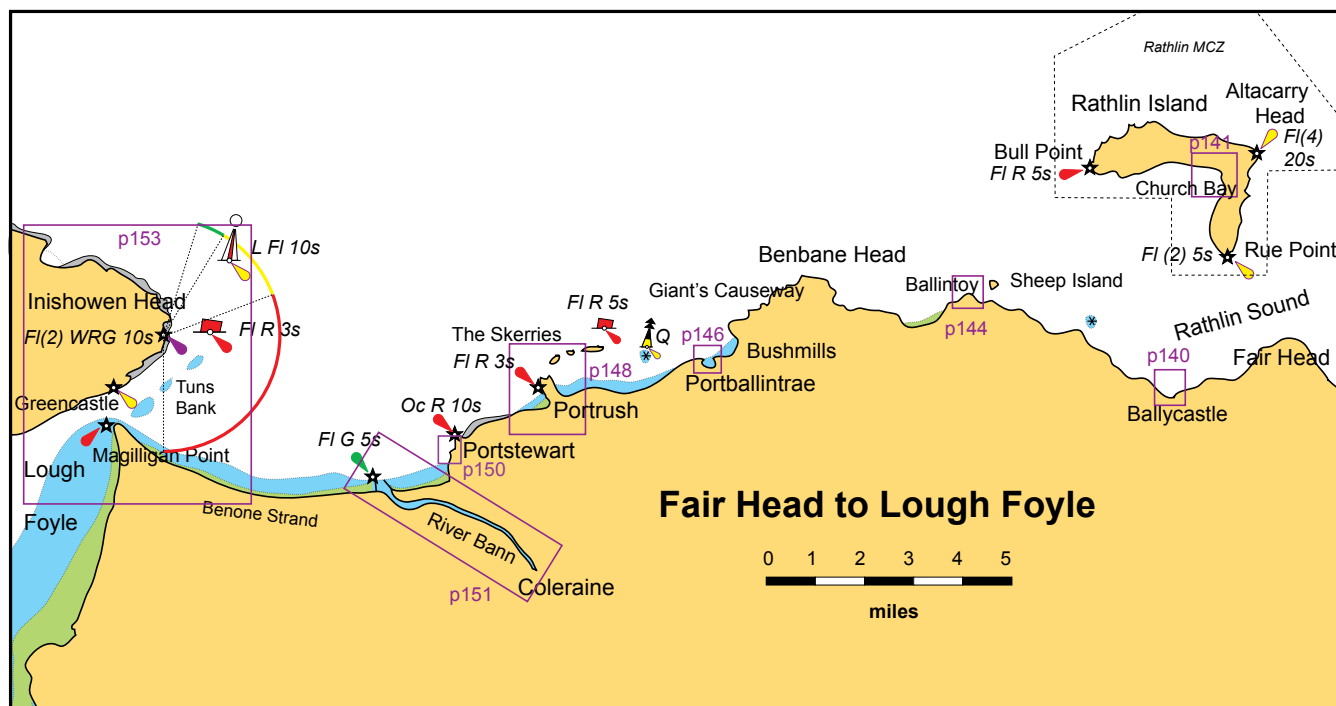
Charts

The Small Craft Folio SC5612 covers the coast as far west as Culdaff, and includes Lough Foyle as far as Derry/Londonderry. AC2798 Lough Foyle to Sanda and AC2811 Sheep Haven to Lough Foyle cover the whole of this section, with the exception of Lough Foyle itself. AC2494 Plans on the North Coast of Ireland has detail charts of Rathlin Sound and Rathlin Harbour, Ballycastle, Portrush and the River Bann to Coleraine. West of Lough Foyle, there is no coverage in the form of a Small Craft Folio. AC2697 Lough Swilly extends as far E as Trawbreaga Bay and has a plan of Culdaff Bay. Imray's C64 has plans of Portrush and Lough Foyle while their C53 has plans of Portrush, Lough Swilly, Mulroy Bay and Sheep Haven. There are, unfortunately, no large-scale charts of Inishtrahull or Garvan Sounds, and care must be taken not to over-zoom on vector electronic charts over areas such as these, covered only by the small-scale AC2798 and 2811. Refer to the general advice on electronic chart use on page 17.

The north coast of Ireland is rugged and beautiful. The part described in this chapter consists of cliffs and sandy bays; the large inlets of Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly are the only ports with all-weather access, but many other harbours and anchorages make this a wonderful cruising ground. The islands of Rathlin and Inishtrahull, the former now a thriving community and a magnet for birdwatchers, the latter spectacular in its lonely isolation, lie across tide-swept sounds.

FAIR HEAD to PORTRUSH

This beautiful 20-mile coast has some of Ireland's most remarkable history, geology and wildlife. It was from the clifftop castle



of Dunluce that the MacDonnells ruled their 16th-century fiefdom spanning Ireland and Scotland, and it was against the cliffs of Benbane Head, four miles to the NE, that the Armada galleon *Girona* met her end in 1588. Between the two lies the Giant's Causeway, and the cliff scenery here, with its columnar basalt, is spectacular. Along the coast and on Rathlin Island, dazzling white veins of limestone contrast with the black of the basalt, and Rathlin is a magnet for birdwatchers, puffins being among the island's most numerous birds. An irregularly shaped area of 26 square miles around Rathlin was designated as a Marine Conservation Zone in 2016, a principal concern being the protection of black guillemots.

Ballycastle (5,100) is renowned for its annual Lammass Fair, which takes place each year at the end of August. Ballycastle was an early site of industrial development in Ulster; close east and west of Fair Head there were once coal mines in the cliff face. The tiny islet of Carrickarede, with its famous rope bridge, is just east of Ballintoy. Portrush (5,700), once a remote fishing port, developed in Victorian times into Ulster's premier seaside resort, and has still the relaxed ambience of a holiday town, while its championship golf course was the venue for the British Open in 2019.

Many places along this coast have acquired recent fame as locations for the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*.

Dangers

Carrickmannanon, dries 0.3m, 5 cables NE of Kinbane Head 📷

The Storks, drying 2·1m, 7 cables offshore
2·5M E of Ramore Head

The Skerries, group of islets and rocks extending for 1.5M ENE of Bamore Head 🗺️

Carr Rocks, drying 0.6m and 0.9m, at the SW extremity of the Skerries chain

'Cruising Ireland'

*This coast is described on pages 204 to 225 of **Cruising Ireland***

Lights and Marks

(Note the conventional direction of buoyage between Fair Head and Malin Head is westwards)

Mull of Kintyre, white tower Fl(2) 20s 91m 24M

Altacarry Head, white tower, black band Fl(4) 20s 74m 26M, Racon (G) 15-27M

Rue Point, white tower, black bands Fl(2) 5s 16m 14M, AIS

Drake buoy, S Card Q(6)+L Fl 15s

Manor House, Port Entry Light Oc WRG 4s 5M, G020°–023° W023°–026° R026°–029°, shows white over Rathlin Harbour entrance, green to S. red to W of approach

Rathlin Harbour S breakwater Fl(2) G 6s 3.5m 3M

Rathlin Harbour N breakwater FI R 2s 5m 3M

Ballycastle N breakwater Fl(3) G 6s 6m 6M

Ballycastle S breakwater Fl(2) R 4s 5m 1M

Rathlin West, white tower Fl R 5s 62m 22M, AIS

Stork Rocks buoy, N Card Q

Skerries buoy, PHM Fl R 5s, AIS

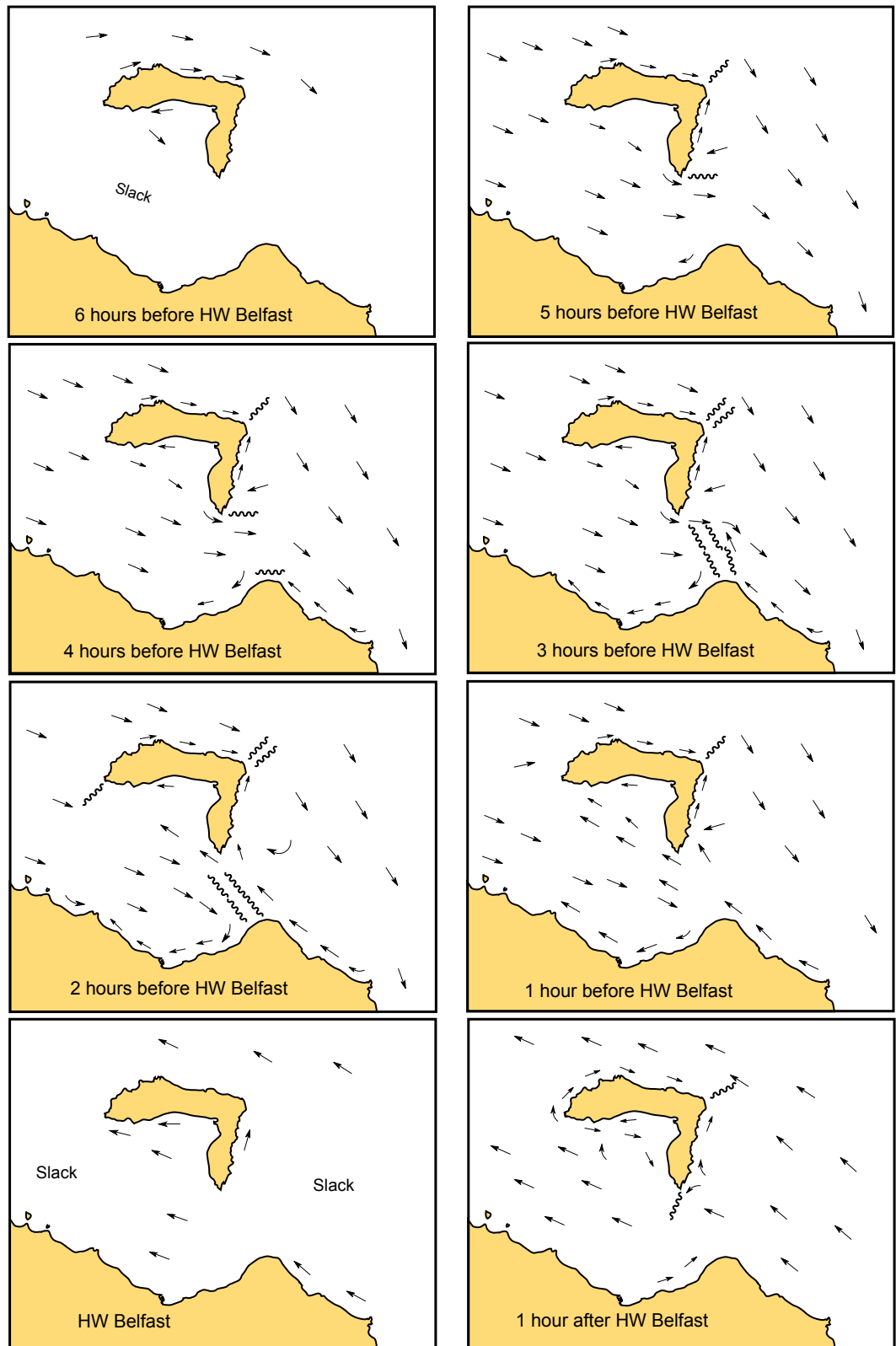
Portrush N Pier, Fl R 3s 6m 3M

Portrush S Pier. Fl G 3s

Portrush leading lights 028° FR (occas)

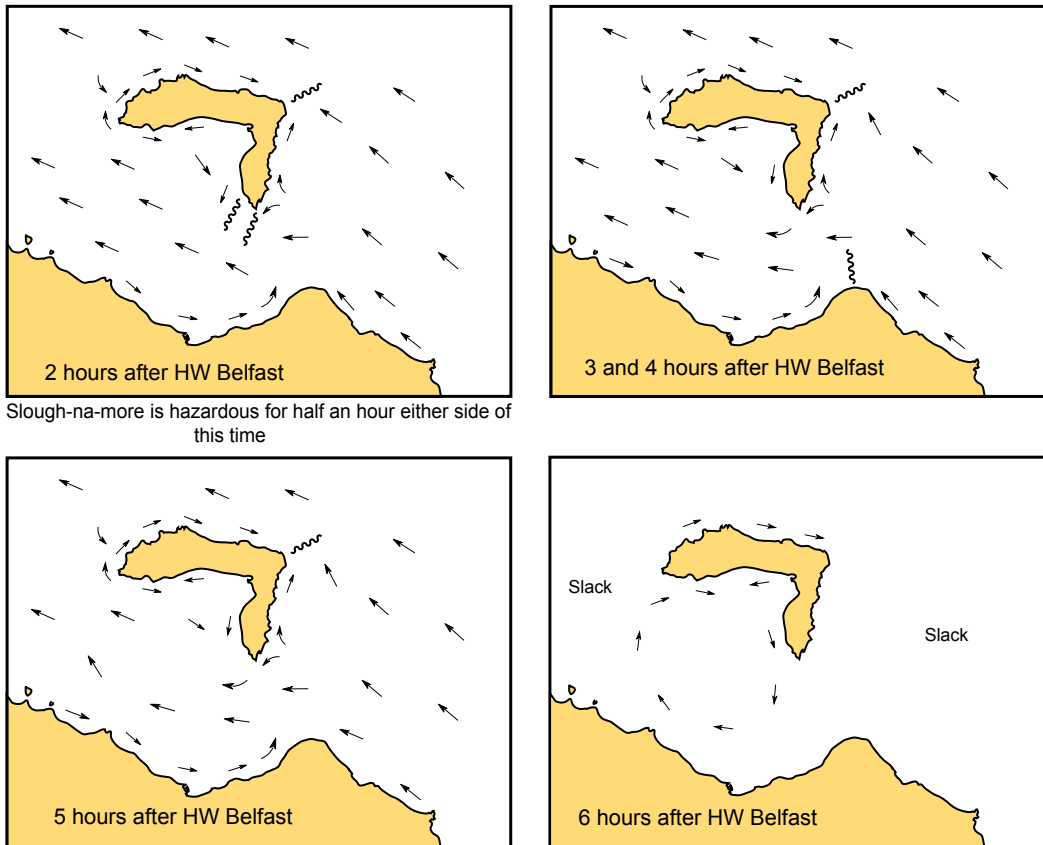
Rhinns of Islay (Scottish coast):

Orsay, white tower Fl 5s 46m 24M



Traffic Separation Scheme

There is a TSS E and N of Rathlin Island. The lanes are each 2M wide; the middle of the E- and SE-bound lane runs from a point 3M N of Bull Point, to 3M NE of Altacarry Head, to 4M NE of Torr Head, and the middle of the NW- and N-bound lane is 4M further to the N and NE. The inshore traffic zone on the Irish side is 2 to 3M wide. The lanes should be crossed at right angles, or as nearly as possible. See the plan on p125.



Tides

Fair Head to Portrush

The rise and fall along this coast is small, due to the amphidromic point N of Rathlin; spring range is a metre at Ballycastle and 1.7m at Portrush. At Ballycastle and Rathlin the rise of tide is irregular and the tidal curves are quite asymmetric; the constant at Ballycastle is -0440 Belfast at springs but -0155 Belfast at neaps.

The waters around Rathlin Island have some of the strongest tidal streams in Ireland, reaching 6 knots at springs, and rates are significant all along this coast, diminishing to 2 knots or so off Portrush. Broadly speaking the tide turns W at HW Belfast and E at LW Belfast, but the patterns in Rathlin Sound are complex, and the Sound has a named whirlpool, Slough-na-more, SW of Rue Point. Tidal charts for this area are reproduced above. Heights (Ballycastle) MHWS 1.2m, MHWN 1.1m, MLWN 0.7m, MLWS 0.2m. Constant (Portrush) -0435 Belfast, MHWS 2.1m, MHWN 1.4m, MLWN 1.1m, MLWS 0.4m.

Directions – Rathlin Sound and approaches to Ballycastle

Slough-na-more is hazardous from HW Belfast +0130 to +0230. Strong to gale force W and NW winds blowing against the tide cause steep and dangerous seas in Rathlin Sound and close N and E of the island in the MacDonnell Race. In such conditions either pass 2M NE of the island (also avoiding the TSS) or preferably wait for slack water. Winds up to F5 against the tide should not cause a well-found yacht any problems in the Sound.

The ideal time to pass W through Rathlin Sound is at HW Belfast +0330, when the

most turbulent two hours of tide are over. This coincides with the likely ETA in the Sound during a fair-tide passage from Larne or Glenarm to Portrush. Heading E and S from Portrush, leave at HW Belfast +0500 (HW Portrush -0300), staying close inshore to avoid the last of the W-going stream. This enables a yacht to arrive in Rathlin Sound at the turn of the tide and to benefit from a full 6 hours of S-going tide in the North Channel.

Fair Head is clean, but from there to Ballycastle the shore should be given a berth of 2 cables. The E-going eddy in Ballycastle Bay on the W-going tide is very pronounced, and in strong SE'lies the wind funnels down over the bay from the high ground S of Fair



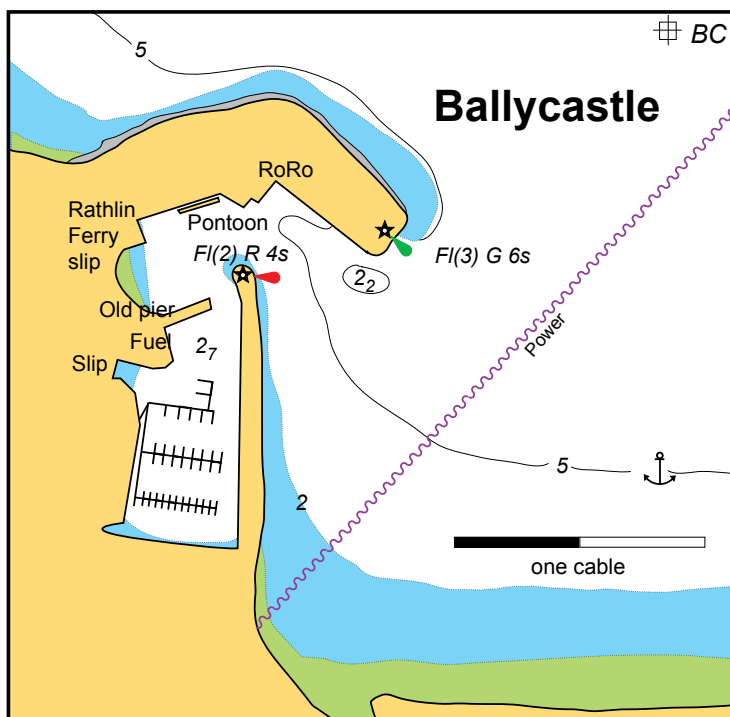
Ballycastle from the NW

Head. Rue Point, the S point of Rathlin, is also clean, and a berth of a cable clears all dangers from there to Rathlin Harbour in Church Bay. The World War I wreck of the armoured cruiser *Drake*, once a hazard to navigation, now has 8m over it, but the S Card buoy is still on station.

BALLYCASTLE

⊕ BC 55°12'·55N 6°14'W

There is a 2·2m patch 20m S of the tip of the N breakwater, and the N and NE-facing sides of this breakwater have rock armouring which should be given a berth of at least 50m on approach. Be alert for vessels leaving, particularly large RIBs, of which there are many in this area. These provide diving, birdwatching and ferry excursions to and around Rathlin Island, and a ferry service to Campbeltown. At the time of writing there is no regular service using the link span inside the N breakwater at Ballycastle. The inner harbour and marina have little room for manoeuvre and yachts longer than 12m or so may prefer to berth on the pontoon W of the link span; check with the HM since this pontoon is used by the fast ferry to Rathlin. The Rathlin vehicle ferry uses the slip at the root of the N breakwater. The inside of the old pier is reserved for fishing vessels. The marina is well-sheltered but the outer harbour is somewhat subject to swell, particularly in strong NW to N winds. Visitors should contact the marina office in advance of arrival on VHF Ch 80 or by phone 028 2076 8525, mobile 0780 350 5084 (office hours). The marina is owned by Causeway Coast and Glens Council. The submarine power cable



to Rathlin Island extends NE from the shore close E of the harbour (see plan).

Facilities

Water and shore power on the pontoons. Slip suitable for trailer sailers. Showers and laundry at the marina office building. The town has supermarket, shops, restaurants, pubs, banks, ATMs, Internet access, doctors. Taxis. Buses to Belfast. Ferries to Rathlin Island and fast RIB service to Campbeltown and Port Ellen.

Anchorage

Anchor SE of the harbour in 5m, sand, E of $6^{\circ}14'1W$ to avoid the power cable. Sheltered from W to ENE but liable to sudden swell.

Constant (springs) -0440 Belfast, (neaps) -0155 Belfast, MHWS 1.2m, MHWN 1.1m, MLWN 0.7m, MLWS 0.2m.

RATHLIN ISLAND

$55^{\circ}17'N$ $6^{\circ}13'W$

Tidal streams in the crook of the island, NE of the direct line between Bull and Rue Points, are relatively weak and often run counter to the main stream in the Sound. The strong tides in the Sound can have the effect of reducing the swell felt at the harbour, but strong winds from W or NW may make the harbour entrance hazardous, particularly during the last two hours of the E-going tide.

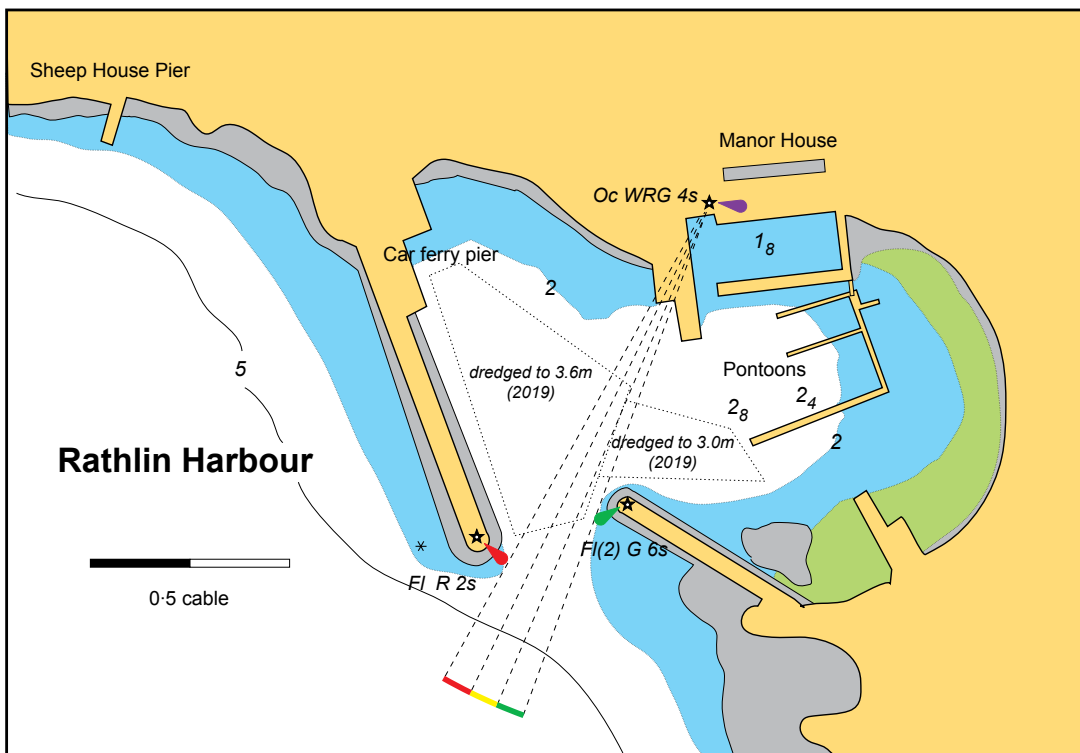


Ballycastle harbour entrance



Ballycastle Marina. The Lammam Fair is in full swing

The entrance to the harbour in Church Bay lies between rock-armoured breakwaters projecting SSE and NW from the shores, and is dredged to 3.5m at LAT. **From the W**, identify the Drake buoy (S Card) and leave it





*Rathlin Harbour:
dredging in progress,
July 2019*

a cable to starboard. **From the E**, steer to pass midway between the buoy and the shore to the E. Approach the harbour entrance on a course of 024° (at night, the white sector of the directional light leads in) and pass midway between the breakwater ends.

Harbour

The outermost pontoon has 2.8m at its outer end and 2.4m down either side. On its SE side the deep water extends only 20m from the pontoon. The inner pontoons are intended for shallow draft boats. The inner harbour offers a sheltered alongside berth in 1.8m, but the fast passenger ferry uses the berth in the NW corner. HM phone 0772 459 4118. The old S pier, within the harbour, dries, as does the small Sheep House Pier, 0.5 cable W of the W breakwater. A submarine power cable runs SSW from a position 0.5 cable W of Sheep House Pier.

Facilities

Water and shore power on the pontoon. Small shops, PO, pubs, restaurants. Ferries to Ballycastle; fast RIB service to Port Ellen and Campbeltown. The RSPB centre at the West light is well worth a visit - buses meet the ferries.

Anchorage around Rathlin

- Anchorage is available in 5 to 8m, close W of the harbour, but stay E of Sheep House Pier to avoid the power cable. Sheltered from NW to SSE but exposed to swell in W to NW winds.
- **Ushet Port** (*see photograph*) is a narrow rocky gut 2 cables NNE of Rue Point. It used to be considered as emergency shelter for small vessels in offshore winds but the improved harbours at Church Bay and Ballycastle now fulfil that role. It is possible to moor at Ushet

*Rathlin Harbour
entrance from the
SW: the Manor
House (centre)
through the gap in
the breakwaters*



Port, about 20m within the entrance, by taking warps to the boulders on either side.

- **Arkill Bay**, 8 cables N of Ushet Port, is sheltered from winds between SW and NW. Anchor close to shore in 5m.
- **Cooraghy Bay**, 7 cables E of Bull Point, provides shelter in moderate N winds. Anchor in 4m, SE of the boat quay.

RATHLIN and BALLYCASTLE to PORTRUSH

Most of the dangers on this passage are above-water or well marked, but Carrickmanannon, 5 cables offshore NW of Ballycastle and to seaward of the distinctive Kinbane Head, is an exception. Bengore Head open of Ballintoy Point clears the rock to seaward. There is a clear passage inshore of the rock, on the transit of the N point of Carrickarede and the S point of Sheep Island (*see photograph*). The channel between Sheep Island and the shore is foul. A berth of 2 cables clears all dangers from Sheep Island to Skerries Roads, but beware of the Storks, a mile E of the Large Skerry. The S side of the main Skerries islands is steep-to, but beware of the Carr Rocks at the W end of the group. They may be avoided by staying close to Reviggerly reef and Ramore Head. The coast is dotted with former salmon-fishing stations, several of them with barely room to turn a small boat round between the rocks.

Carrickarede (*Carrickarade on the charts*)

55°14'·3N 6°19'·5W

Carrickarede, 3·5M WNW of Ballycastle, is best known for its rope bridge, now a major tourist attraction in the care of the National Trust but designed originally to provide access to the islet's salmon-fishing station. The old landing and ruined cottage are on the SE side, overlooking a bay with 5 to 10m of water and sheltered from S to W. The bay is subject to swell but provides an intriguing temporary anchorage (usually with a large crowd of spectators) in favourable weather.

Ballintoy Harbour

55°15'N 6°21'·6W

This small harbour lies immediately W of Sheep Island. Temporary anchorage in the approach to the harbour is available in settled weather, and with sufficient rise of tide the



Ushet Port, Rathlin Island; Fair Head across the Sound



(above) Kinbane Head from the E



(left) Carrickmanannon



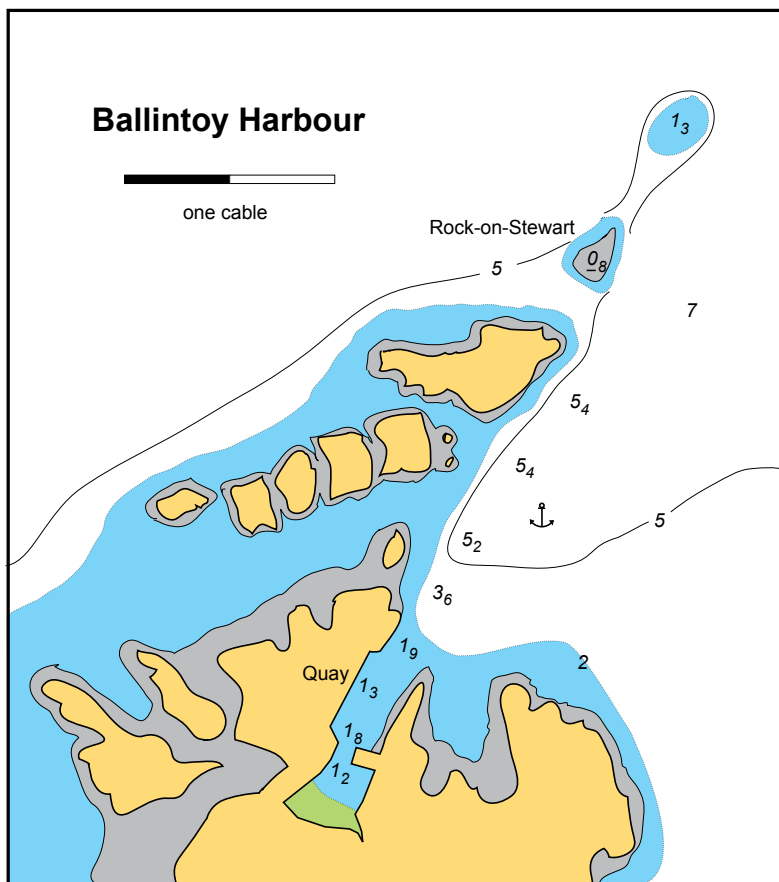
The N point of Carrickarede in line with the S point of Sheep Island clears Carrickmanannon to the S



Carrickarede; the old salmon-fishing station, R



Approaching Ballintoy; the church tower open of the old Coastguard Station (L) leads SE of Rock-on-Stewart (breaking, R)



Ballintoy Harbour

harbour provides a temporary alongside berth for a small yacht. The harbour is sheltered from the NW by a chain of rocky islets terminating in **Rock-on-Stewart** (dries 0.8m) and a rock with 1.3m, close NE of it. **From the E**, leave Sheep Island a cable to port and steer for the entrance. **From the W**, keep the N end of Carrickarede closed behind Sheep Island until the entrance opens up. Keeping Ballintoy church tower open of the old Coastguard Station (*see photograph*) leads SE of Rock-on-Stewart. Note that the church tower is not visible from close inshore. The islets on the starboard hand are clean and steep-to on their SE sides, and the S shore of the bay is reported also clean but has not been exhaustively surveyed recently. The outer quay has 1.3m; the inner harbour is shallow and full of small-craft moorings. Anchorage is available in 4 to 5m in the approach to the harbour. Subject to swell. There is a tearoom at the harbour.

Portbradden

55°14'·1N 6°24'·5W

Portbradden, at the W end of the splendid Whitepark Bay, provides a landing at its jetty but shelter only in moderate offshore winds.

Dunseverick

55°14'·5N 6°26'·3W

Dunseverick, recognisable by the cluster of buildings and caravans near the shore, has a boat slip and a small pier with 0.5m at its head, and a pole beacon with triangular top-mark. Approach only in settled weather with no swell, on a course of 220°, leaving the rocky islet close N of the pier to starboard.

The Giant's Causeway

55°14'·7N 6°30'·8W

The coast from Dunseverick to Bushmills Bay, including Bengore Head, Benbane Head and Runkerry Point, has spectacular cliffs of columnar basalt. The World Heritage Site of the Giant's Causeway itself, 1.3M SW of Benbane Head, is relatively inconspicuous from seaward, but may usually be recognised by the constant bustle of activity around and upon it. The coast here is normally subject to significant swell, and tidal streams reach 3 knots at Benbane Head, but in settled weather or offshore winds it may be approached with care to within a cable. There is however no



Ballintoy from the SW; Sheep Island upper R, Rathlin in the distance (Kevin Dwyer)



Dunseverick



Portbradden



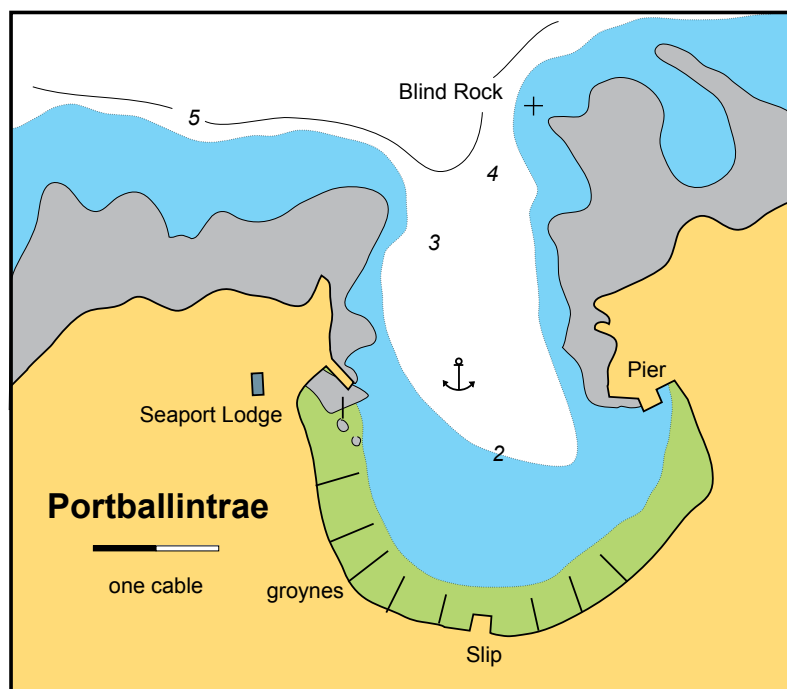
The spectacular cliffs and stacks of Bengore Head, above the Giant's Causeway



The Giant's Causeway from seaward



Portballintrae from the SE; Seaport Lodge, centre. The Storks, upper centre with the Skerries beyond, and Ramore Head top L. Inishowen Head and Glengad Head in the distance. Seaport Lodge is now surrounded by new houses but is still conspicuous (Kevin Dwyer)



Portballintrae from the N; the slipway, centre R. Blind Rock, breaking, L

anchorage closer than Portballintrae, and for a visit to the Causeway the most convenient harbour is usually Portrush.

Portballintrae

55°13'·5N 6°32'·9W

The village of Portballintrae lies around a horseshoe bay 3·2M SW of Bengore Head, and is the only significant built-up area on the coast between Ballycastle and Portrush. The bay is subject to swell but provides reasonable anchorage in offshore winds. A heavy swell from the N breaks right across the mouth and makes the anchorage hazardous. Enter steering S for the conspicuous slipway on the beach, taking particular care to avoid **Blind Rock** on the E side of the entrance, and anchor in 2·5m when the head of the W pier comes in line with the distinctive classical Seaport Lodge. The pier on the E side of the bay has 0·9m at the steps and is used by diving and sea-angling boats. The slip is not suitable for trailer sailers. Boat club, pubs and hotels.

The Storks

55°13'·2N 6°35'·4W

This drying reef in the approaches to Skerries Sound had an old unlit beacon which collapsed in 2016, and the reef is now marked by a N cardinal buoy a cable to the N. Either pass north of the buoy or give it a berth of at least three cables to the S.

Skerries Roads

55°13'·2N 6°37'·5W

Skerries Roads provide an attractive anchorage in moderate winds between W and NE. The best spot is close inshore abreast the notch in the Large Skerry, in 5 to 7m.

PORTRUSH

⌘PR 55°12'·3N 6°39'·8W

The busy holiday resort of Portrush, flanked by splendid beaches on either side, has perhaps the most convenient harbour on the north coast. The town sits astride the promontory of Ramore Head, and its harbour, a cable each way, faces SW into Portrush Bay. The harbour, designed by John Rennie, was completed in 1836, and was upgraded in 2019 by dredging and provision of additional rock armouring. The basin NW of the moorings and alongside the quay has 4m and the mooring area 3m. Portrush

harbour is accessible by day or night at any state of the tide and offers secure shelter in all summer weather although in strong to gale force W to NW winds the entrance can be hazardous and the swell can penetrate into the harbour. In heavy onshore weather even the lifeboat is occasionally unable to return to base and must wait in the Foyle for conditions to moderate.

Directions

From the E, Ramore Head and the cliffs S of it are steep-to and may be approached to within half a cable. Leave Revigerry close to port to avoid the Carr Rocks at the SW end of the Skerries group. Identify the N breakwater, and do not turn in until the entrance is well open, to avoid sunken boulders extending 20m SW from the breakwater end. A patch with 0.3m extends N for almost 2 cables from the end of the S breakwater. At night, the red light on the N breakwater head is an excellent mark but may be hard to distinguish among the town lights from a position well out to sea. Approaching from the E at night, the safest course is to stay N of the Skerries, leaving the Skerries buoy to port, and do not turn S until the harbour light is identified.



Portrush Skerries from the E



The Storks reef, with its N Card buoy and the stump of the old beacon



Portrush entrance from the W. Note the shallow water off the N breakwater



Portrush from the SW; Ramore Head L, and West Isle and the Carr Rocks beyond; the Little Skerry, top, and the Large Skerry, top R