



**The history:**

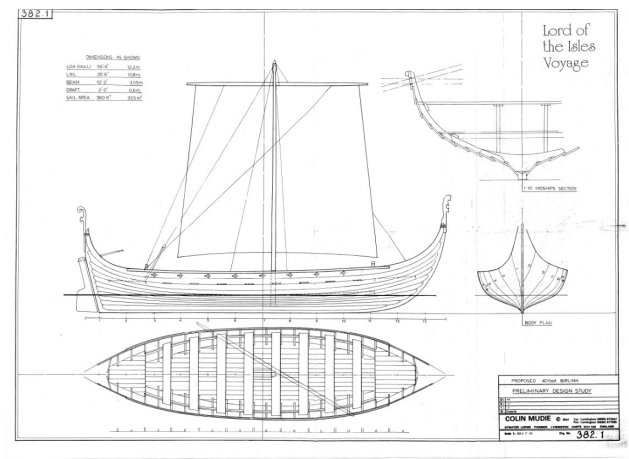
The undecked galley – referred to as a Nyvaig or Birlinn – was the vessel developed from Viking lines which enabled Somerled, the founder of Clan Donald to break the power of the Vikings in the Western Isles during the twelfth century.

For the next 400 years these beautiful craft, swifter and more manoeuvrable than their forebears, formed the sole means of communication in the Lord of the Isles kingdom created by Somerled. Galleys are distinguishable from longships as they have a straight sternpost on which a rudder, replacing the Viking steering oar, was hung – making it one of the first vessels recorded to use an actual rudder.

The Aileach was launched in 1991, the fruit of much detective work. A search for clues was necessary because centuries have elapsed since the last one was built, although the uses of such vessels were well remembered.

Estimations of length and beam came from Scottish state papers and interpretation of carvings – especially an effigy in the McLeod tomb in Rodel on the Isle of Harris.

A well-known historic designer, Colin Mudie, who designed the leather curragh Brendan which sailed across the Atlantic, produced the Aileach design from all the fragments of history. She was built in Moville, County Donegal, by three Macdonald brothers, whose family have been building wooden boats there since 1750.



**The adventures:**

1991 – for her maiden voyage, the Aileach was rowed and sailed 400 miles in 60 days by a mix of Scotsmen and Irishmen from Westport in Mayo, Ireland, to Stornoway in Lewis.



Staffa, 1991



Crossing the Minch, 1992



1992 – The Faroes voyage, over 500 miles from Moidart to the capital Thorshavn in the Faroes and back. During the voyage, when the Aileach was 200 miles north of Scotland, she was battered a summer gale and broke her rudder. The galley crew were rescued and the galley towed to Stromness in the Orkney islands, where she was re-built and set off for a second and successful sail.

1993 – Racing round Skye. Aileach took part in a challenge made the year before to the Faroese, a race circumnavigating the Isle of Skye. The Faroese boat was borrowed from a museum and said to be over 100 years' old. The race showed up different sailing characteristics – the rowing power of the Faroese who pulled and sang for twenty-three hours non-stop on a diet of dried haddock and whale blubber; and the downwind sailing prowess of the Aileach.

1994 onwards – almost every year there were more adventures involving schools, the armed forces, and visiting Clan Donald clansmen from the USA.

From 2004 onwards – there were regular filmings for television programmes including BBC series Highland Clans, History of Scotland, and Countryfile. Aileach's last voyage was to the Arisaig Highland Games in 2016 where she was guest of honour beached on the beautiful white sands of Morar.

### **The future:**

The galley has been exhibited in front of the Kildonan Museum on South Uist for the last few years, in a prime position on the north-south road. Since the galley has been in position, the number of visitors to the museum complex has increased significantly and the level of inquiry and interest in the galley has been substantial. The increase footfall is around 25%, with record visitors this year of around 5,000 people.

The Lord of the Isles Galley Trust has gathered an enormous amount of material, both research and documenting the many adventures. The plan, as a first stage, is to ensure the galley is safe and can be viewed by the public – combined with an interpretation and explanation of the history, and what has been found out through the various projects undertaken. In addition to display boards, photographs, maps, galley equipment, its planned to have continuously-playing documentaries.

As a second stage, the trust is keen to expand the galley house into a larger Maritime Museum Centre. This topic has limited coverage on the west coast of Scotland in general – and where better to portray the maritime history than the Hebrides.



The galley being oiled by volunteers, 2022.



The proposed new building at Kildonan Museum.

**For more information and to donate to the project, please visit: [www.galleyaileach.co.uk](http://www.galleyaileach.co.uk)**