Quayline

The Town That Sets Its Clocks by the Tide

For ninety years Perrin Sound has kept a time of its own. A new ferry timetable may be about to end it.

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The Town That Sets Its Clocks by the Tide

For ninety years Perrin Sound has kept a time of its own. A new ferry timetable may be about to end it.

Words by Ana Velasco

The clock on the customs house at Perrin Sound is, by every official measure, wrong. It runs eleven minutes ahead of the mainland on a spring tide and twenty-six behind on a neap, and nobody who lives here would have it any other way. Children are late for school by the moon. The baker opens when the water reaches the third step of the slipway, which is a thing you can see from his bedroom window, and his bread has never once gone cold on the quay.

Oskar Lindqvist has wound that clock for thirty-one years. He climbs the iron ladder twice a day with a brass key and a thermos, and he talks about the mechanism the way other men talk about a difficult brother. “It doesn’t keep time,” he says, leaning out over the harbour with the key in his fist. “It keeps the water. Time is what the mainland calls it when they have stopped looking out of the window.”

1 A dial with no numbers

The town’s odd arrangement began by accident. In 1934 a storm took the telegraph cable, and for most of a year the only reliable signal Perrin Sound received was the one that came in twice a day and lifted every boat in the harbour. The harbourmaster of the time, a practical woman named Greta Moen, had the customs clock fitted with a float and a chain so that the skippers could read the tide from the water, and the cable was eventually repaired, but the chain stayed where it was.

Over the decades the rest of the town followed the chain. The school bell went first, then the fish auction, then the Saturday dance. By the 1960s the parish had printed its own almanac, a thin yellow booklet that lists each day’s working hours against the height of the sea. A visitor who asks when the post office opens will be told to look at the third step. Most visitors assume this is a joke, and go on assuming it until they have missed the post.

We were never against the mainland. We simply had a better clock.

What strikes an outsider first is how little of this feels quaint. Nobody here dresses up for it, and nobody sells a souvenir of it. Tide time is simply how the day is arranged, the way a shift pattern arranges the day in a mining town, and people argue about it with the same tired fondness. Nurses at the cottage hospital keep two watches, one on each wrist. The vet refuses to keep either, and has a stick on the slipway with notches cut in it.

How to read the third step

The almanac divides the slipway into seven steps. Work begins when the water covers the third.

1. Step one: the baker lights his oven.
2. Step three: shops and the school open.
3. Step five: the fish auction starts.
4. Step seven: nobody goes out in a small boat.

2 The cost of being late

Living by the water costs something, and the people who pay it can tell you the figure. Ines Carvalho runs the only freight firm on the island and has to meet a mainland lorry that does not care about the moon. She keeps a spreadsheet of what the difference has cost her, and she is careful to say that it is not a complaint. Last winter she lost four contracts because her vans arrived in the wrong hour, and she kept the fifth only by sleeping in the cab.

Crossing	Boats a day	Minutes late, on average
Perrin to Halse	6	14
Perrin to Oster Bay	3	22
Night freight	1	37
Summer excursion	2	9

The figures are a kind of folklore now, repeated in the Anchor on a Friday and rounded up with every telling. What they describe is real enough. The young leave more often than they used to, and those who stay have learned to keep their mainland appointments in a second, private calendar. The town council commissioned a study in the spring. It ran to a hundred and forty pages and concluded, on its last page, that the town should decide what it wanted.

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Then the ferry company wrote. From next April the crossing to Halse will run to a fixed timetable, every ninety minutes, whatever the water is doing, on a new electric boat that does not care about the depth at the slip. It is a better boat by every measure. It is quieter and cleaner, and it arrives when it says it will, and that is precisely the problem.

3 What a timetable does

Greta Moen's great-granddaughter, Tove, teaches physics at the school and chairs the committee that is meant to find an answer. She has no patience for sentiment. She draws the problem on the classroom board as two waves drifting in and out of step, and she points out that they come into line every fourteen days or so, and that for a few hours the town and the mainland agree. "You can plan a life around that," she says. "People do. It is only awkward if you insist that one of the two waves is real and the other one is a mistake."

The committee's draft proposal keeps both. The ferry and the freight would run on mainland time. The school and the shops would stay with the water, for now, and the customs clock would go on being wrong in public. Critics call this a fudge, and Tove does not argue with the word. A town can hold two clocks in its head, she says, because this one has been doing so for ninety years without noticing.

Nobody is sure how it will feel. The older skippers think the new boat will be running half empty within a year. Their grandchildren have started asking, not unkindly, what exactly the third step is for. On the quay in the evening the two groups stand a few yards apart and watch the same water come up the same stone, and each is privately certain that the other is late.

4 The almanac room

The yellow booklet is still set by hand, in a low room behind Church Lane that smells of machine oil and cold tea. Ragna Moen, a distant cousin of the harbourmaster's family, has printed it for twenty-two years on a press that was already old when she inherited it. Every December she takes the tide tables from the naval office, corrects them for the shape of the Sound, and adds the things no table knows: which week the herring come in, when the school will close for the regatta, how late the Anchor will serve on the longest night of the year.

Critics call this a fudge, and Tove does not argue with the word.

Nobody pays her very much for this. The parish covers the paper, and she charges a small sum per copy, which some households settle in fish. What she has instead is a position in the town that no official title describes. People bring her their arguments. If two neighbours disagree about when a boundary fence was moved, or which year the slip was last relaid, one of them will walk over to Church Lane and ask to see the old booklets, which are kept in shoeboxes along the wall, ninety of them, each no thicker than a slice of bread.

She took one down and opened it on the bench. The pages for a March in the 1950s were crowded with pencil, in three or four different hands, recording late boats and early frosts and the name of a child born on a very high tide. "That is what a timetable can't do," she said, closing it again. A fixed departure tells you when to be there, and it cannot tell you what kind of a day it was.

5 Who gets to be late

Not everyone on the island is sentimental about this, and the people least sentimental are often those who have the least room for error. Samir Haddad came to the Sound six years ago to run the pharmacy and has never quite forgiven it. Prescriptions from the mainland arrive on whichever boat can get in, and twice last winter he drove the length of the island at night with insulin in a cool bag because a delivery had come in on the wrong side of a tide. He likes his neighbours and he likes the water. He would also like, he says, to be able to promise someone a thing by Tuesday.

The newcomers tend to take his side, and so, more quietly, do many of the young mothers, who have spent years working out how to get a child to a mainland dentist without losing a day's pay. Their view rarely appears in the romantic articles that get written about the town, of which there have been several. Tide time is easy to admire from a hotel. It is less charming for anyone whose week depends on someone else's calendar, and it has always been hardest on those with the least say in how the town arranges itself.

Tove Moen accepts all of this. The old arrangement, she points out, was never free. It was paid for mostly by people who were not on the committee that kept it going, and any new one will need to be honest about who pays for that as well.

Samir Haddad came to the Sound six years ago to run the pharmacy and has never quite forgiven it.

6 The last winding

On the evening I left, Lindqvist let me climb the ladder with him. Up close the clock is a modest thing: a float, a chain, a set of gears from a scrapped trawler winch, and a dial whose numbers were painted out in the seventies because they had stopped meaning anything. He fitted the key and turned it eleven times, counting under his breath, then held on to the rail and looked at the tide for a long while without saying anything.

He has an apprentice now, a girl of sixteen who comes up on Sundays and is better with the chain than he is. He does not know whether she will still be climbing the ladder in thirty years, and he says it is not his business to know. The water will come up either way. All the clock has ever done is admit it.

Around the Sound

1. The Anchor, Quay Street: fish suppers until the fifth step.
2. Moen Almanac Office, Church Lane: this year's yellow booklet.
3. Carvalho Freight, North Pier: bookings by the tide or by telephone.
4. Halse Ferry Slip: fixed departures from next April.
5. Lindqvist Clock Walk: Sundays, weather and ladder permitting.

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Set in Zen Maru Gothic.
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