

# Baltic images

By Clive Williams, Talisman (HR34)



Gallnö Rock

It is no easy thing to write about a Summer cruise from Fehmarn in Germany, into Poland via the former East Germany and on up to Stockholm, since it is to travel through too many memories, contrasts and experiences to do justice to in a short article. I thought of Scandinavian polymath August Strindberg who said a painting should be about feelings, not of the sticks and stones; so for a change I recount vignettes or fragments which stirred my feelings on the journey. The flavours are deliberately not in any order or tense nor is it an itinerary or a route map. Also I give you two small videos which you can access on line – the links are at the end.

## Baltic Landscape

I cannot imagine that it is possible to sail the Baltic without being awed by the landscape which nature with the patience of millennia so dramatically shaped and changed. From the Southern Baltic coasts littered with erratics – boulders carried hundreds of miles from their home by massive glaciers and dropped in strange surroundings such that the nautical chart resembles a tablecloth scattered with peppercorns and on

Northwards, where above Kalmarsund the landscape changes to granite skerries and islands, and islands into archipelago like nebulae. I walked up from Sandvik harbour on Öland, above the handful of scattered painted houses and was lost for words at unworldly rows of glacial moraine carefully laid in parallel lines stretching out of sight. The overwhelming power and mass of the dying ice age – almost two miles thick – has left its mark in the neat lines of stones or grooved bedrock gouged as if by the claws of some phenomenal creature. It is tortured like a Munch landscape, yet it is so beautiful and for me, it is so humbling.

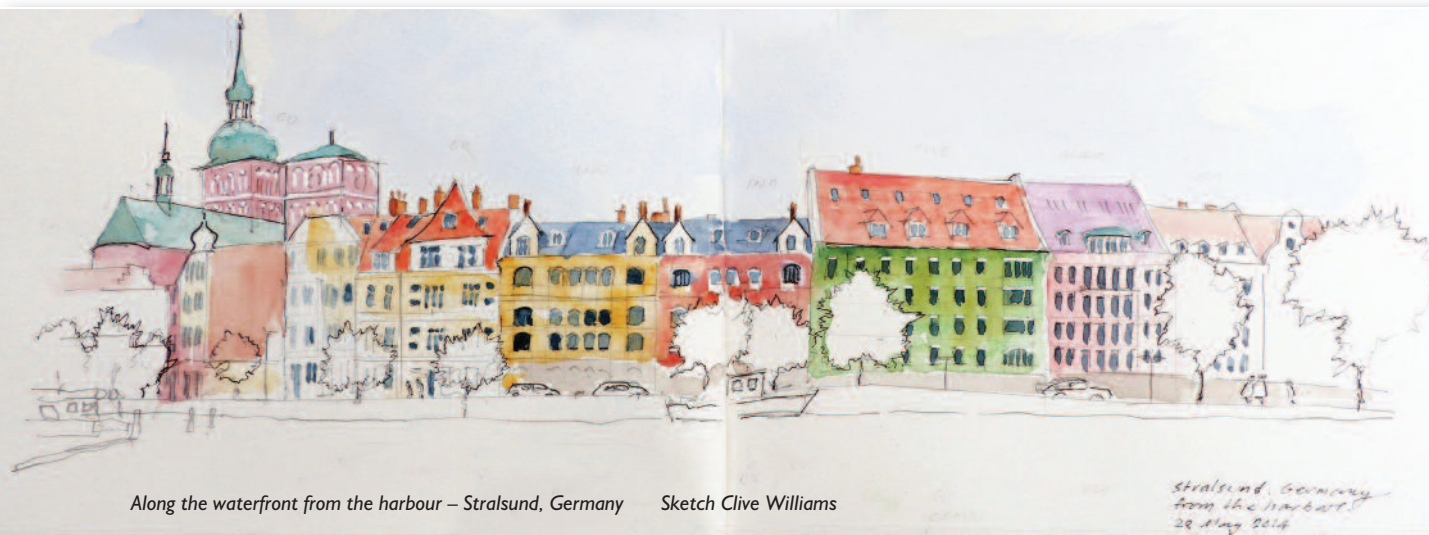
Across these islands of smoothed granite, trees and plants thrive, wild flowers find a footing to drift a haze of blues, reds and yellows across the plains. Tall Vipers Bugloss, Field Cow Wheat, magenta Dianthus, Knapweed, Anthemis and the lovely lime yellow Mouse Eared Hawkweed. And where the trees are dense enough to form a wood, the lichens live in a luxuriant untouched magical world as in some Tolkien Middle Earth, inches thick blanketing over rock and surface with a dense carpet of pastel shades paying mute homage to the purity of the air. Most times there are pathways to tread on

soft scented beds of pine needles with the sharp crack of fir cones underfoot and swathes of ready to pick wild blueberries along the track and everywhere there is a sense of special privilege and respect walking in such a delicate and almost sacred environment. Clearly the Swedish people know the treasure they have and work hard to preserve it.

## Stralsund, Germany

The old Hanseatic League city of Stralsund benefited for centuries from a monopoly on the Baltic trade – just look at the magnificent buildings and sea front where the harbour provided a good place to sit out a full on Easterly gale and give time to sketch.

Like so many towns in the former East Germany, the fabric of the town became decayed and even derelict but in spite of all the odds, there are treasures still here which made me gasp – at St Mary's Church the silver organ pipes tower above the most perfect baroque ornamentation of angels and intricate craftsmanship of what is one of the finest organs still in working existence having been built around 1658, a quarter century before JS Bach was born. On that day someone was playing



Along the waterfront from the harbour – Stralsund, Germany Sketch Clive Williams



Bach, adding another dimension to the experience. The altar screen is a riot of medieval art and colour and gold yet bravely to one side was an exhibition of photographs and text telling the story of the city from 1930 to 1945. I

stood in a black emotional silence with others trying to come to terms with the depth of man's cruelty – my eyes filled with tears and I silently withdrew finding difficulty in coping with the images of people who had given up all hope and events which took place in this very city on these very streets. Where was humanity, where was civilisation, where was love for fellow man?

## Hano, Sweden

Much to our amazement the island harbour of Hano was double packed with yachts dressed overall in colourful signal flags and the waterfront thronged with unexpected activity - it was, we were to learn, the Mid Summer Eve weekend so tentatively we decided to triple raft against a yacht and a very small motorboat on the inside - they seemed happy enough. The tiny rocky island, 1km x 2km has one fishing harbour, about 60 traditional wooden houses and 11 inhabitants out of season but today they had been invaded by celebrating hordes and us.

The Swedes go bananas over this festival - everyone decorating a "Maypole," a cross with two wreaths, and weaving flowers into it to add their own touch. Most women, children and some men were wearing magnificent crowns of leaves and flowers - a

Swathes of Wild Flowers cover the islands



sense of thanks for all the good things Summer has brought as well as good riddance to Winter. Later in the day a large crowd gathered around the Maypole dancing to a small band, accordion and guitar with a caller leading the very amusing steps which seemed, so far as I could tell, not unlike Ring a Ring of Roses to the tune of My Old Man's a Dustman but with actions. The evening wore on with much laughter, barbecuing, drinking, sack races and adults willingly making fools of themselves with an egg and a spoon.

## Szczecin, Poland

Poland has suffered more than its fair share of wars over the centuries. In the Polish city of Szczecin the Cathedral Basilica of St James

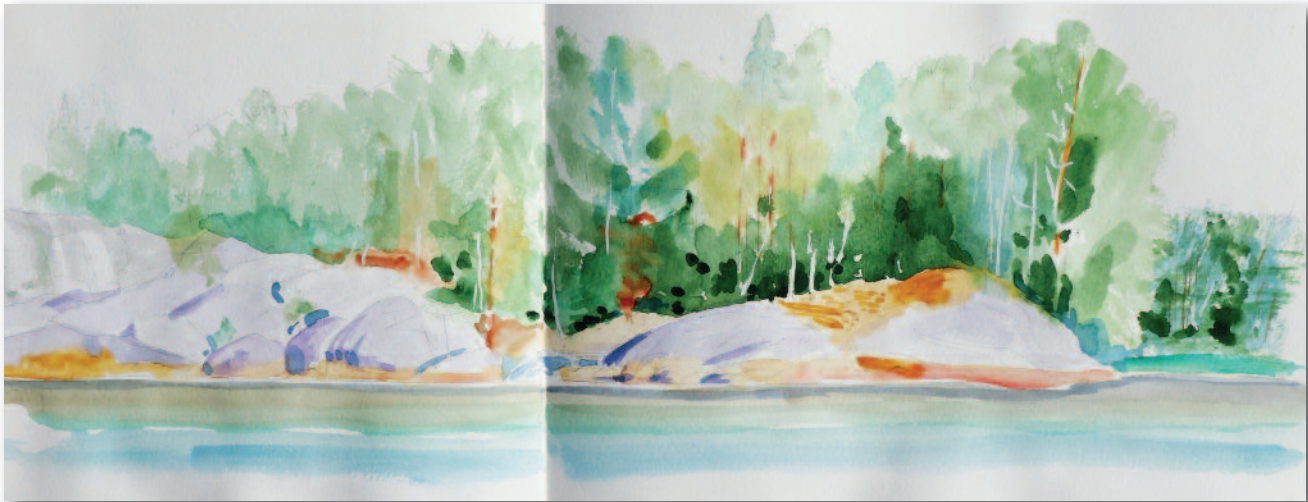


Watergirls

was built for the first time in the 12th C but war damaged many times and yet again rebuilt after WWII, its brick exterior is strident and functional with little elegance but leaving the heat of the day outside it conceals a wonderful interior of soaring columns flooded with light pouring through the most spectacular modern stained glass windows I think I have ever seen – to me they were reminiscent of the jewel like art which Russia was once so good at with astonishing use of colour and flowing line, like silks moved by a breeze. In that wonderful setting a marriage ceremony was taking place. The young couple making their solemn pledges to each other in timid whispers which floated over the hushed congregation and breathed upon the stone fabric in every corner of the cathedral. A tightness came to my throat - I was near captivated by the ceremony, beauty and light when a lone voice began to sing, so fine and pure, then accompanied by strings and finally the organ – the music filling the vast space, enhancing every spiritual aspect of the experience – I was absolutely knocked out and have more to say about it than I am







*Sack, a wonderful Nature Harbour in the archipelago. Sketch by Clive Williams*

able to write just now.

### Stockholm, Sweden

Ernest Thiel was an extraordinary man. He became a bank director at the age of 25, an astute collector of art, was the wealthiest man in Sweden and then in the 1920's it all fell apart and he lost everything – except his family of course. His magnificent house stands elevated on a granite mound at the SE tip of Djurgården island in the Stockholm island complex overlooking one of the seaways into the city. Through woodland and beyond the tall white perimeter walls, a freshly raked gravel drive leads up to the house and his entire collection of art which is simply out of this world.

Scandinavian art has its own voice, one of trees and forests, lakes and the swirling light of nature – not so commonly seen in our galleries – there is a freshness and sense of discovery in this magical work. I still struggle to find a way of adequately describing my astonishment descending the beautiful ten tread stairway into an inner sanctum to be overwhelmed by a room full of large landscapes and figurative paintings by Edvard Munch who was sponsored by Thiel – and there on a plinth at the foot of the stairs is something so wonderful it is beyond imagination – a masterpiece in pure white alabaster by Auguste Rodin. The rough rock below morphing into a roaring sea above and from the waves, three exquisite Sirens entwine in an embrace to draw this passing sailor down to drown in their beauty.

### Ueckermünde, Germany

Peering from under a large green restaurant sun-shade, between market stalls and across a fan cobbled square, the beautifully cared for old buildings across the way emphasize the incongruity in many towns of the former East Germany. We are having a birthday lunch in the delightful town of Ueckermünde. You would call it pretty, quaint even. Flowers and trees at every turn, a modern fountain which draws you back with its ingenuity, gracefully curved granite faced steps sweep the incline



*Ueckermünde. Sketch by Clive Williams*

and a bronze sculpture brings a smile. All is well with the world and the vast resources poured into the old GDR from the West in order to rectify decades of Soviet neglect and structural damage left me feeling astonished once again at this aspect of re-unification.

But as in many towns, you don't have to go far before you discover the incongruity – a house – once someone's home – wedged on either side by beautifully maintained elegance, yet this house is utterly derelict and decaying – crumbling like some Dickensian Miss Havesham robbed of its future by a past

tragedy. I am told that though the authorities continue to search, nobody knows who owns these houses or what became of the families, so they stand and wait in silence – one can only imagine.







### Natural Harbours, Sweden

It is 7.30 in the evening. We are swinging at anchor along with eight other yachts and one motor boat in a natural harbour fjord out in the Stockholm archipelago. It is just under a mile long and a third of a mile wide and most of us are lying nearer to the tiny hamlet at its head where a handful of traditional red painted wooden cottages are scattered over the rocks and through the trees, sunlight fragments colour tree bark and fall to the ground as if peering through the brim of a tattered straw hat. Those closest to the waters edge have wooden docks with a moored boat alongside or a sauna hut or somewhere to sit in the evening and worship the Sun. It is drinks and nibbles now – time to soak in the tranquillity which descends every evening, the wind dies and the water becomes glassy, like a silent still lake. The sun shines through a milky veil after the thunderstorm earlier today – but the colours have come back. Long stretches of fine tall reeds of pale green and ochre line the waters edge and occasional massive bedrock breaks through like huge grey whales trying to slip back into the water and behind, a coloured backdrop of broadleaf trees mixed with conifers rises and falls, describing the profile of the rocky land.

There are the noises of children shrieking and laughing from the water learning to row in two small rubber dinghies, others are swimming with their parents from the yachts, and beyond, young men are diving from a jetty with all the bravado they can muster. Astern, a volleyball match is in progress somewhere behind the trees, the game is punctuated by spontaneous cheers and applause until at 8:20 pm the group of

young men and women come down to a jetty where their motor boats are moored and as a team unceremoniously jump into the water to cool off and swim.

Now, the evening is cooling. A frog starts to croak in the distance, a muffled ripple of laughter from the volleyball players in the trees, the children all on their respective yachts where the Swedish flags hang almost motionless from the stern. The boats swing silently in response to the slightest breath, turning slowly like the hands of a clock, then returning to their original direction. A fish has started feeding a few metres away and there

is a plop as he breaks the surface to take a fly – and then again, once more. The farther yachts now stand white against the dark conifers silhouetted by the setting sun and the water back there is like delicately hammered silver with pale streaks of gold. It is hypnotic and mesmerizing and so peaceful.

### Links with sound

**Marienkirche, Stralsund**

<https://vimeo.com/104636091>

**Baltic Ripples, Denmark**

<http://vimeo.com/74564702>

