

## Isles of Scilly - St Mary's with Robyn Coates

Let me preface my presentation by saying that I am no expert on the Isles of Scilly and many of you probably have more knowledge than me.

The Isles of Scilly originally were introduced to me by the TV Program, 'An Island Parish', shown many years ago. Some of you may have watched it – the series detailed the appointment of an Anglican Minister and later a Methodist Minister and introduced us to some of the locals and the struggles they experience - isolation, lack of employment, schooling, transport between islands etc.

In 2011, we were privileged to hear CAV member, Ray Nicholas, speak about shipwrecks around the Isles of Scilly and this increased my interest and my knowledge.

So, very early in 2012, when we were planning a visit to Cornwall, it was decided we would spend a day on St Mary's. I'd seen this small archipelago of islands illustrated on maps (usually in a small box) and totally ignored it. I had never quite figured where they actually fitted into the Cornish landscape.

The islands are located about 40 kms off the south west coast of Cornwall in the northern Atlantic Ocean.

With me not being a good sailor, we chose to fly from Lands End/Penzance Airport, located about six kms from St Just in Penwith, a 20 minute flight, in a 10 seater, twin engine plane, and not take the Scillonian III which takes about 2¾ hours from Penzance.

If you have ever watched the TV programme 'Coast' and seen the Scillonian battling the seas, you will have seen how rough the boat ride can be and sometimes the Scillonian is cancelled.

I have on occasions had to exit a tram due to motion sickness and on the Dover/Calais crossing I am the person standing outside.

At the time, the return day trip airfare cost £95 per person (plus £6 for car parking at the airport). When I last checked it was from £127 and it is no longer a 10 seater plane. This was more than double the cost of a day return by boat but worth every penny to me. The other advantage of flying was that we could spend longer on the island for a day trip.

If you have ever travelled on a small plane/helicopter, you would know that at the airport we were weighed as were our bags and our positions aboard the plane were determined by balancing the weight.

Both airports had grass runways, with a small, concreted tarmac, and we were warned, when we booked, that if it was a very wet day, a foggy day or an excessively windy day, then the plane may not be able to fly.

My fear was that we might be stranded on the island or worse still have to return by ship.

Thankfully all the planets were aligned and we had a beautiful sunny day – one of two in the twelve days we spent in Cornwall.

The journey, though short was picturesque and we had great views of the Cornish coastline, though I still haven't worked out which towns were which; we flew over Longships Lighthouse and were given great views of the various islands.

The population of Isles of Scilly is 2,226 in 2020.

In the year between mid-2019 and mid-2020, the population in Isles of Scilly grew by an estimated 2 people, and in the ten years before mid-2020, the population grew by 2.

The total area of the Isles of Scilly is about 17 square kms.

We had 6 hours on St Marys and were able to cover much of the island in that time though we stayed mainly in the two towns and on made roads.

Hugh Town and Old Town.

At the time, I had a Baker's Cyst behind my knee and walking was quite difficult.

Bishops Rock Lighthouse in distance

Boats which travel between the islands The Yellow boat is an ambulance

The Scillonian 111

RMV Scillonian III is a passenger ship based at Penzance in Cornwall, England, United Kingdom, run by the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company. She operates the principal ferry service to the Isles of Scilly and is one of only three ships in the world still carrying the status of Royal Mail Ship (hence RMV – Royal Mail Vessel).

She is the third passenger ship to carry the Scillonian name and made her first trip to Scilly on 19 May 1977.

Scillonian III has a length of 68 m, a beam of 11.85 m, a draft of 2.89 m, a gross tonnage of 1255.25, and a service speed of 15.15 knots (28.06 km/h). Due to the number of tidal currents which meet off Land's End, and the need for a shallow draught to allow access to the Islands, the sea journey can be rough, causing sea sickness.

Scillonian III is currently in service for passengers and cargo 8 months of the year, carrying up to 485 passengers for day trips or longer holidays.

Scillonian III is to be replaced by a new vessel, to be named Scillonian IV.

The new vessel, will be 72m long and will carry 600 passengers. It will be able to travel at 18 knots (abt 33 kms) and is designed specifically to improve passenger comfort.

This was where we ate lunch. Very rowdy but decorated with paraphernalia supposedly from ship wrecks.

Some of the local shops – many designed for tourists

St Mary's Hotel

Star of the sea Catholic Church built in 1860

The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin.

Built between 1836 and 1838 this is now the main church of the Isles of Scilly.

It was designed and built by Augustus Smith who was at this period the Lord Protector of the Islands. One of the conditions of the lease undertaken by Augustus was that not only should he build a church but he must also pay the Chaplain of the Isles.

Holiday home of the Prime Minister Sir Harold Wilson and his wife Mary who were regular visitors to St Mary's.

He is buried at St Mary's Old Church Churchyard.

Lady Wilson died on 6 June 2018 of a stroke, at St Thomas' Hospital in London (aged 102), having outlived her husband by 23 years.

The longest-lived spouse of a British prime minister, she was the first to live beyond the age of 100 years.

A private service followed by cremation took place on mainland Britain, and her ashes were buried with her husband at Old Town Churchyard in St Mary's, Isles of Scilly on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> July.

This is Five Islands Academy school - a multi-site school, serving the island communities of Bryher, St Agnes, St Martin's, St Mary's and Tresco.

Primary aged school children are educated on their home island (except those on Bryher who are taught on Tresco).

The St Mary's Base has primary and secondary provision. Secondary school pupils from the off-islands are able to board on St Mary's at Mundesley Boarding House (Monday - Thursday nights).

The boarding house is funded by the Department of Education with contributions from parents. There are about 270 children at all the schools

Star Castle – now a 4 star hotel. Star Castle is a fortress on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, built in 1593 by Robert Adams, Surveyor of the Royal Works (d.1595) and Francis Godolphin, Captain of the Scilly Isles, during the "Spanish invasion scare."

The Star Castle was built in 1593 by the Surveyor of the Royal Works and mapmaker Robert Adams, under the direction of Francis Godolphin, Captain of the Scilly Isles, following the Spanish Armada of 1588.

Fearing another Spanish invasion, in May 1593 Queen Elizabeth I ordered the construction of a fort and two sconces as a lookout for any intruder ships.

A scone is a small protective fortification, such as an earthwork, often placed on a mound as a defensive work for artillery.

View from the Star Castle Hotel

**The Pilot Gig World Championships were to be held two days after our visit.**

Many of the boats had already been transported across from Penzance and we were able to watch and chat to crew members making adjustments to their craft.

St Marys hosted many thousands of visitors who either rowed gigs or cheered on their team. Teams came from all over England but predominantly from Cornwall.

The boats all had to be transported from Penzance to St Marys on the *Scillonian III* or *Gry Maritha* over a four week period and returned to Penzance again over a four week period.

If 15 of the crew travelled aboard the ship, their boat was carried at a reduced rate.

However, if the crew decided to fly, it was nearly three times as expensive to carry the gig.

The *Gry Maritha* is a cargo vessel and operates all year round leaving Penzance Monday, Wednesday and Friday and returns Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday whereas the *Scillonian* only operates for about eight months of the year and generally only one trip per day.

There is a smaller cargo vessel *Lyonesse Lady* which operates around the islands.

The Cornish pilot gig is a six-oared rowing boat, built of Cornish narrow leaf elm, 32 feet (9.8 m) long with a beam of four feet ten inches.

It is recognised as one of the first shore-based lifeboats that went to vessels in distress, with recorded rescues going back as far as the late 17th century/early 18th century.

The first 'gigs' were used to carry the 'pilot' out to ships waiting off the Cornish coasts. The pilot would then navigate the ship through the potentially hazardous rocks into the harbour.

Pilots needed to row out to the ships quickly - it was a competitive career as the first pilot to reach the waiting ship would receive the pilot's fee. They often rowed more than 10 miles.

Gig racing evolved both from this competition and from the testing of newly-built gigs against others to measure their performance.

Competitive gig racing was popular in Cornwall during the mid-19th century, but by the end of the century began to decline as the industrial revolution gathered speed and engines increasingly replaced sails and oars.

Many gigs were subsequently broken up or left to rot, but Newquay in Cornwall managed to retain a few and formed Newquay Rowing Club in 1921.

One of their boats, Treffry, built in 1838 still races and is used as the standard measurement for the construction of all new boats.

Newquay Rowing Club also owns two other historic gigs: 'Dove' built in 1820 and 'Newquay' built in 1812 - which is considered to be the oldest rowing boat in the world.

All modern racing gigs are based on the Treffry, built in 1838 by William Peters of St. Mawes, and still owned and raced by the Newquay Rowing Club. However non-racing gigs have been built which do not conform to the exact specification of the Treffry and are disallowed from racing in competitive races.

The sport is governed by the Cornish Pilot Gig Association (CPGA), which monitors all racing gigs during the construction phase.

Maureen Fuller told me on one occasion about her family connection to the *Treffry* and she has sent me this information – including this photo of William Peters and also the three boats – the Newquay, the Dove and the Treffry.

William Peters, Boatbuilder, St. Mawes Born: 17th March 1776

Died: 13th July 1859 aged 83 years.

He built 'Newquay', oldest gig in the world. Number 1 on the gig roll.

He was asked to build 3 gigs to be exported to Malaya. He built them but when they went to load them on the boat bound for Malaya, there was only room for 2 boats. So one remained in Cornwall and is named 'Newquay' and now owned by Newquay Rowing Club. He also built 'Dove', which is Number 2 on the gig roll and the Treffry, which is Number 3 on the roll.

He said that his fastest and best boat was the Treffry and now, for the Pilot Gig Championships, every gig has to be made with the measurements of the Treffry. Measurers go to see every gig destined for racing and check the measurements as it is being made. The new boat is not allowed to race for 2 years after it is built, as it needs to be water logged. When the pilot gig was first designed, they wanted to have 8 oars. H.M. Customs would not allow this as the gig would be too fast and would outrun the revenue cutter. Consequently, it was only allowed 6 oars so the Customs men could catch up with the gig, if they were used for smuggling.

*When we had the Gorsedh in Newquay, I was able to go down to the Rowing Club on a practice night and lo and behold, the Treffry was on the beach. I think that was the best bit of Newquay Gorsedh for me! I was also welcomed into the clubhouse to see the memorabilia and they were quite pleased to see a descendent of William Peters of Peters Boatyard, St.Mawes.*

*His sister was Lucy Peters who married William Green and she was my 3xGreat Grandmother. William, the gig builder and Lucy's father was also called William Peters and he would be my 4xGreat Grandfather. I am really proud that I am a descendant and they are part of my DNA. It is such a Cornish thing, gig racing.*

*The Pilot Gig Association decided to have a championship on the Scillies on a May Bank Holiday in 1990.*

*To juice it up, they added the word 'World' in front of Championship to make it sound more important and of course, everyone seemed to want to come and new Pilot Gig Clubs were being formed all over the place and abroad.*

*There is even one in London and the rest is history.*

*The World Championships only attracted a few crews from Cornwall in 1990, but over the years the amount of pilot gigs attending has increased with crews coming from all over the South of England, the Netherlands, Ireland, France and beyond.*

*It now has 120 crews each year and gives a massive boost to the Isles of Scilly's economy.*

*Well done William Peters!!!*

### **We wandered around St Marys Old Town Church and church yard.**

The Anglican church of St Mary was built at Old Town during the 12th century, with re-building carried out in 1666 and 1743.

By the nineteenth century, it was derelict and under the orders of Augustus Smith, Lord Proprietor of the Islands, it was restored.

Prior to the construction of the Parish church this was the principal church of St Mary's. It started off as a Norman construction built c. 1130 and has been altered on several occasions.

Reports indicate that the church had deteriorated so much by the early 1800s that it was rebuilt in the 1830s.

It was restored in 1890 by the reverend W. E. Graves resulting in the building you see today. Since it was no longer the main parish church only a much smaller church resulted from this rebuild. The north-west entrance was added at

this time. Overall it measures approximately 8 by 10 metres. There is a round headed Norman arch and pillar in the north wall adjacent to the vestry-porch. According to the woman cleaning, the church itself doesn't have electricity and 'epilogue' services are held under candlelight on Sundays, at 8.00/8.15 pm, during the warmer months – usually Easter to September. I think there was one power point in a kitchenette where they could boil a kettle. the stain glass window depicts the Crucifixion

James Harold Wilson, Baron Wilson of Rievaulx, KG, OBE, PC, FRS, FSS (11 March 1916 – 24 May 1995) was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom twice, from October 1964 to June 1970, and again from March 1974 to April 1976. He was the Leader of the Labour Party from 1963 to 1976, and was a Member of Parliament (MP) from 1945 to 1983.

He died from colon cancer and Alzheimer's disease on 24 May 1995, aged 79 and was buried at St Mary's Old Church on 6 June 1995.

A memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1995

His epitaph is *Tempus Imperator Rerum (Time the Commander of Things)*.

At The Old Church – church yard

The churchyard of Old Town church serves as the principal cemetery for the island of St Mary's.

Over the centuries countless members of the old Scilly families have been buried here, as have been the crews of numerous ships lost near the Isles.

Among them are Sir John Narborough and his brother James, sons of Rear Admiral Sir John Narborough.

Following the death of their father in 1888, their mother married Sir Cloudesley Shovell.

Shovell and his two step sons all died in the sinking of HMS Association in 1707.

The sinking of the Association is an interesting story.

In 1707, twenty-one British gunboats departed Gibraltar, and they sailed for the British Isles. Not long after leaving Gibraltar, the boats ran into severe weather. As they got further into the Atlantic Ocean, the wind, rain and waves got even stronger. The flotilla commander was Admiral Cloudesley Shovell.

After three weeks at sea, the British admiral summoned all the navigators of the other ships to his flagship, the H.M.S. Association. He asked navigators one simple question: Where are we?

Twenty out of the twenty-one navigators believed the flotilla was located close to the east bank of the channel, not far from the shores of France. One navigator, however, disagreed: In his opinion, they were close to the Scilly Islands, a small group of islands in southern England.

In other words, he thought that the ships were closer to the west bank of the channel.

Admiral Shovell chose to accept the majority opinion.

But it turned out that it was the lone navigator who was correct:

The flotilla wasn't near France, but very close to the treacherous sandbanks and the destructive waves of Scilly Islands.

The Scilly naval disaster of 1707 saw the loss of four warships of the Royal Navy fleet off the Isles of Scilly in severe weather on 22 October 1707.

Between 1,400 and 2,000 sailors lost their lives aboard the wrecked vessels, making the incident one of the worst maritime disasters in British naval history.

The disaster has been attributed to a combination of factors, including the navigators' inability to accurately calculate their positions, errors in the available charts and pilot books, and inadequate compasses.

HMS Association, struck the Outer Gilstone Rock off Scilly's Western Rocks at 8 PM and sank, drowning her entire crew of about 800 men and Admiral Shovell himself.

HMS Eagle, hit the Crim Rocks and was lost with all hands on Tearing Ledge amongst the Western Rocks. It is estimated that HMS Eagle had at least as many crew as HMS Association;

Sinking a few hundred metres away from Bishop Rock, her wreck lies at a depth of 130 feet.

HMS Romney, hit Bishop Rock and went down with all save one of her 290 crew being lost.

HMS Firebrand, the Outer Gilstone Rock like Association, but unlike the flagship she was lifted off by a wave. The Captain managed to steer his badly damaged ship along the southern side of the Western Rocks between St Agnes and Annet, but she foundered in Smith Sound, sinking close to Menglow Rock and losing 28 of her crew of 40. Local legend has it that Shovell was alive, at least barely, when he reached the shore of Scilly at Porthellick Cove but was murdered by a woman for the sake of his priceless emerald ring, which had been given to him by a close friend, Captain James Lord Dursley.

At that time, the Scillies had a wild and lawless reputation. It is claimed that the murder came to light only some thirty years later when the woman, on her deathbed, confessed to a clergyman to having killed the admiral and produced the stolen ring.

Several historians doubt the murder story as there is no indication that the ring was recovered and the legend stems from a romantic and unverifiable deathbed confession.

Another legend alleges that a common sailor on the flagship tried to warn Shovell that the fleet was off course but Shovell had him hanged at the yardarm for inciting mutiny. The story first appeared in the Scilly Isles in 1780, with the common sailor being a Scilly native, who recognized the waters as being close to home but was punished for warning the admiral.

Three terraces were added to the churchyard by Augustus Smith and here there are three memorial obelisks, a war memorial, one to Augustus Smith and one to the victim of the S. S. Schiller, Louise Holzmaister.

The lower of these two is a memorial to Augustus John Smith, who started the Tresco Abbey Gardens. He is generally credited with saving the Scillies from absolute destitution, and setting the economy on the road to recovery.

Augustus Smith reads:

TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
AUGUSTUS JOHN SMITH  
FOR 38 YEARS  
LORD PROTECTOR OF THE ISLES OF SCILLY  
THIS MONUMENT  
IS ERECTED BY THE INHABITANTS GENERALLY  
TO PRESERVE  
THE RECOLLECTION OF NAME  
HENCEFORTH INSEPARATELY CONNECTED  
WITH THESE ISLES  
HE DIED AT PLYMOUTH 31ST JULY 1879  
AND WAS INTERRED AT ST BURYAN CORNWALL

This obelisk, perched on the highest point of the Old Church graveyard on St Mary's, was raised in memory of Louise Holzmeister by her husband. Louise Holzmeister was a passenger on the Schiller. She was 23 years old and travelling to Germany from New York to join her husband. Her body was never recovered.

In memory of Louise Holzmeister.

Born at New York May 15th 1851.

Lost her life in the wreck of the SS Schiller off the Scilly Isles May 7th 1875.

Her body resting in the deep. This monument has been erected to her memory as a mark of affection by her husband.

The Schiller was a large iron steamer of 3,421 tons gross. 380 feet long. 40 feet wide and 24 feet depth in the hold. There were two decks and a spar deck. She had 600 h.p. engines, two funnels, and two masts with sails.

Owned by the German Transatlantic Steam Navigation company of Hamburg, she left New York for Hamburg, via Plymouth, on April 27th, 1875, with 254 passengers and 101 crew, nearly all German.

Her general cargo included the Australian and New Zealand mail, and 300,000 20 dollar gold American coins worth £60,000.

They were running ahead of schedule but, as they passed the Isles of Scilly, they ran into thick fog. The crew immediately took in the sails, reduced speed and kept a good look out. However, they missed the lighthouse at Bishop's Rock and ended up to the east of it, within the dangerous waters of the archipelago.

They struck the rocks and between the heavy sea and the angle of the ship, they were unable to launch all the life boats.

In the end they launched three of the eight available.

The bulk of the survivors remained on the sinking ship and hoped for rescue.

They shot their signal gun half a dozen times and then sent rockets up but the thick fog blanketed out the results.

Only one shot was heard on St. Mary's and that was misinterpreted as meaning that the Schiller had passed Bishop's Rock and was clear of the Isles of Scilly.

At daybreak, ships from St. Agnes went to try to help but they were not able to get near the Schiller, owing to the weather.

Seven men who were swimming in the water were rescued but the rest were trapped on the wreck.

By the time the lifeboat from St Mary's made it to the location, the ship had sunk and there was nothing left to do but collect the bodies.

At Old Town churchyard two graves were dug, each 25 feet long, in which the coffins were laid to rest in two layers. Over the following days Scillonians and Cornish fishermen arrived constantly with bodies hidden beneath sails so another mass grave was blasted and dug at Old Town and the mourning processions continued.

The general cargo was also washed up along the Cornish coast, and by August 1877, the last of the 20-dollar gold pieces was salvaged. Out of the total value of £60,000 most of it had been recovered.

Supposedly during the wars, the Germans were told not to attack the ships going to the Scilly Isles because of the kindness shown to the survivors of the SS Schiller – however the Isles were attacked!!

This is the War Memorial located in the Old Church Churchyard. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains a section of the church yard.

So after a wonderful day, we boarded our plane back to the mainland.