

Cruise to the Isles of Scilly, August 13th – August 22nd 2004

By 6 am, the wind had veered to the north-west and our mooring in New Grimsby Sound was now more exposed than it had been. However there was sufficient depth of water to escape to the south east, so we slipped our mooring and said our goodbyes to Tresco abeam on the port side and Bryher to starboard. Rain was imminent and visibility was beginning to deteriorate but our channel markers, prominent rocky ledges, were still visible and likely to remain so until we were safely in deeper water. A French Halberg-Rassey 44 soon overtook us, following a graceful 'S' course, indicating the use of a chart plotter to keep to the deepest part of the channel. However, I was confident of my tidal calculations and steered a straight course for the channel exit, arriving there 15 minutes later and now ahead of the French yacht.

Satisfaction, though, was short-lived. Awareness that we were too close to one of the rocky ledges arrived fractionally before the echo sounder signalled dramatically falling depths. A violent course correction to starboard and we were once again in deeper water, but with my heart beating a lot faster than it is used to so early in the morning.

The Isles of Scilly: 5 inhabited islands, 43 uninhabited islands and hundreds of rocks, covered or not depending upon the tide. The 2000 residents form the most south-westerly community in the British Isles. For the sailor it offers limited moorings but plenty of anchorages. The Shell Channel Pilot sums it up like this:

“You may be safe, but will not always be comfortable, because the swell of the ocean is never far away. Scilly is for sailors, and for them the rewards can be great, provided they come with proper ground tackle. If you want a guaranteed quiet night, stay on the mainland.”

Our trip to the Isles of Scilly had started a few days before when 3 friends, David, Mac and Richard, and I had picked up Craftsman II from Gosport. Our Friday evening departure had coincided with the end of Cowes week, so our night time sail down the Solent was illuminated by fireworks and then threatened by a flotilla of RIBs tearing back to their home ports after the end of the festivities.

From the Needles , past Portland Bill and across Lyme Bay was one long beat into a F5/6 and a rough sea; it wasn't until we were able to turn north towards Plymouth, having passed Prawle Point, that we were able to sail on a reach and therefore more comfortably. The most extraordinary aspect of this trip was hearing no less than 5 MAYDAYs over the VHF. The first, on Friday night, was one of those RIBs hitting a tug; the rest were all on Saturday, a tribute, no doubt, to an August weekend and un-August-like weather.

We arrived in Plymouth at midnight on Saturday. The following morning we picked-up two more crew, my daughters Leo and Hennie, who had driven down so we could have a vehicle available when we handed the boat over at the end of our cruise to the next charter. Plymouth Yacht Haven was chosen as the rendezvous because it is easy to get to by road and doesn't charge for leaving a car in its car park.

On Sunday midday we sailed for the Helford River and the following morning left early for the Isles of Scilly with a forecast for light to moderate south westerly winds and heavy rain. As we made our way out into the Atlantic and towards Wolf Rock the sense of drama from Saturday continued. From the VHF we were aware of some mysterious incident involving rescue services from much of Cornwall, including Falmouth and the Isles of Scilly. Later, we were unable to raise St Mary's harbour master due to the same emergency. The next day we discovered the reason, namely the wall of flood water that had swept through Boscastle in North Cornwall, a disaster which had the Maritime and Coastguard Agency issuing warnings for mariners about debris in the sea for days afterwards.

The ideal way to get to Scilly is to wait on the mainland for a nice big summer anti-cyclone to develop and then use the easterly winds to take you there in some comfort. When the anti-cyclone begins to break-up, make use of the prevailing westerlies to come back. Unfortunately, when you have a fixed holiday, booked well in advance, you just have to take what comes!

Our sail to the Isles of Scilly was a 14 hour beat to windward into a moderate, at times rough sea. Towards the end it looked as if we were not going to make it by nightfall. Since the pilot strongly advises against a night approach to St Mary's harbour, unless you have local knowledge, I reluctantly put on the engine. Just as we were closing St

Mary's Sound a lengthy and prolonged downpour reduced visibility, one thing you need plenty of with this particular landfall.

Fortunately, of course, we have GPS; what a miracle that would seem to sailors off the Isles of Scilly, in bad visibility, less than 300 years ago, who, returning from points south often had no idea of their own longitude! Famously, in 1707, Admiral Sir Cloudsley Shovell, mistakenly believing he was off Brest and sailing up the English Channel, led the cream of the British Navy onto the Western Rocks of the Scillies with a loss of over 2000 men. This disaster led to a £20,000 prize being offered for the person who could solve the longitude problem, and eventually to John Harrison's famous timepieces.



St Mary's Roadstead & Hugh Town

St Mary's harbour has substantial moorings but they are susceptible to swell whenever the wind goes north of south west. They do tend to get rather full during summer. One surprise was that most of the moorings were taken up with French boats. My initial thoughts that this must be because French yachtsmen are more

adventurous than British ones was later modified with the realisation that, for the French, the prevailing winds are on the beam both there and back.

Despite experiencing some swell, we stayed for 2 nights, giving us plenty of time to explore Hugh Town, walk around the island and visit the museum. The museum is worth visiting since it gives an insight into how people lived on the islands before tourism and because of the many lurid tales of shipwreck. Impressive displays give details of a rare Iron Age warrior burial and a find of enamelled broaches from Roman times indicating the importance of the islands on trade routes between Celtic Britain and the European mainland. Displays of flora and fauna, though, were a lot less impressive.

Hugh Town serves as the “hub” for all the other islands. The ferry from Penzance, the Scillonian III, drops tourists in the harbour and there are plenty of boats ready to take them to wherever they want to go. On Tuesday evening we took up David’s suggestion that we avail ourselves of one of these boats to go to St Agnes, take a walk up to the old lighthouse, and have supper in the Turk’s Head. This trip also provided an opportunity to check out one of the few anchorages on the Scillies, which offer protection from the north-west.

To a skipper worried about leaving the safety of a secure mooring, the tourist traffic to the other islands offers an alternative way of exploring the Scillies. With the weather forecasts warning of strong winds and gales I was very tempted to do just that. In the event, I decided that if the 6.40am VHF forecast on Wednesday did not mention a gale warning we would depart on a rising tide and head for an anchorage in St Helen’s Pool – it didn’t so we went.

St Helen’s Pool is an anchorage you get to by following a transit during a short period either side of high water. The problem is identifying the transit, described as a “carn” on St Helen’s Island in front of, and in line with, a huge cleft in the pile of rocks known as the Men A Vaur. What exactly is a “carn” and which of the many piles of rocks is the Men A Vaur? Despite the poor visibility we eventually worked it out, and it was an amazingly good transit, rather like sighting down the barrel of a rifle, with the stock pointing away from you.

Once in the Pool you are wonderfully protected from the Atlantic swell rolling in from the west by a formidable reef of rocks against which we could both hear and see the thunder of breaking surf. If you have a good dinghy with a reliable motor you are well positioned for exploring a number of uninhabited and inhabited islands, including Tresco and St Martin's. Unfortunately, we had neither: Craftsman's inflatable can only hold 3 adults, only 2 if there is any sort of slop, and the outboard would conk out regularly. So we restricted ourselves to exploring the nearest two uninhabited islands, one of which, St Helen's, used to be the home of a hermit monk, St Elidius, credited with converting King Olaf Trygvasson of Norway to Christianity in 988; he was raiding the islands at the time! Later his dwelling was converted into a chapel (services are still held here once a year) and later still the island became home to a quarantine station.



St Helen's Pool (with yacht) from St Martin's, Tresco in Background

The Pool was a beautiful anchorage. The water was clear and, when the sun came out, aquamarine. We were surrounded by spectacular rocky outcrops, verdant islands and fine sandy beaches. During dusk, just as we were relaxing with a beer in the

cockpit, 3 gigs glided past with hardly a sound; just the whisper of their wakes and a rhythmical whoosh of oars making contact with the water. The gigs, 6 oars and a cox, are 30ft open rowing boats; they were the traditional working boat of these parts and were used as pilot boats and lifeboats. Today, gig racing is a spectator sport.

Just to make sure we didn't relax too much, we received a gale warning just after the tide had fallen sufficiently to deny us a return passage to St Mary's. However, since the gale's arrival was scheduled as "soon" rather than "imminent" there would be a period before it arrived when we could depart if the anchorage looked as if it would become untenable. Fortunately that didn't happen and we spent a windy day and night swinging on the hook, but more comfortable and peaceful than we would have been in St Mary's.

On Thursday, we left the Pool, with many a fond backward glance, slipped through a gap in the rocks into Old Grimsby Sound (to the East of Tresco), turned north-west out into the Atlantic rollers, round the north of Tresco, and then turned south-east into the shelter of New Grimsby Sound, to the west of Tresco. There we picked up a mooring and enjoyed a day of glorious sunshine exploring the island. We all opted to do different things. Mac & I went to see the world-famous gardens on Tresco, the girls headed for a sheltered beach and David and Richard went walking. We all met up on the beach at Old Grimsby, which we had seen when anchored in St Helen's Pool, but had not been able to get to because of a lack of a robust enough tender. Some of us swam with the clear water allowing us to see many species of fish and crabs scuttling along the bottom.



Old Grimsby Sound, from East Bryher Looking Towards Tresco's Harbour

This was our last day in the Scilly Islands. It was from our mooring, in between the islands of Tresco and Bryher, that we left to return to Falmouth on Friday morning as described in my opening paragraph. We were all sad to go and vowed to return. My daughters had opted to take the Scillonian back to Penzance and join us in Falmouth later – thus ensuring another day of sightseeing. Us four chaps made the most of what little sightseeing was possible in the murk as we tore through Crow sound, to the north of St Mary's, with a F5/6 on the starboard quarter.

Our reward for not taking The Scillonian was half-an-hour playing with dolphins in between Scilly and Wolf Rock. None of us had ever been so close to so many of these wonderful animals. As they raced alongside, on either side of the boat, leaping over each other as they crossed just in front of the bow, I was worried that one might make a misjudgement and end up on deck – of course, none of them did.

After the Isles of Scilly the rest of the cruise seemed quite tame, despite a F7 on the way back, the buzz of Falmouth and the considerable natural beauty of the River Yealm. What is it about the Isles of Scilly that so powerfully impresses itself upon



Hell Bay On West Bryher (on the same day!)

one's consciousness? Perhaps it is the sub-tropical climate in an Atlantic setting, or the clear turquoise waters, or the quaint islands with lush vegetation? Perhaps it is the countless beaches of fine yellow and silver sand, largely free of the detritus of modern civilisation, or the many, varied, sculptured, gravity-defying rock formations wherever you look? Perhaps, for a sailor, it is the need for detailed and accurate navigation, the existence of so many beautiful anchorages yet the apprehension of getting caught on a lee shore in deteriorating weather? Take your pick! For the crew of Craftsman II, it was an unforgettable experience.