



# Walking the Scilly way

Lorna Maybery pulls on her boots to take part in a walking festival on the Isles of Scilly

**T**he view from the Skybus De Havilland Twin Otter aircraft was spectacular as we flew over the Isles of Scilly, situated off the coast of Cornwall and the UK's southernmost settlement.

These beautiful islands were playing host to a walking festival, held yearly in March, and which attracts people from all corners of the UK and further afield.

The day was clear, but blustery when my small plane landed and I had my fingers crossed for good weather over the next few days as I had booked myself onto a number of walks and didn't relish the idea of getting soaked on a daily basis.

There was a huge variety of walks on offer during the event, with something on all the five inhabited islands and to suit most abilities. Events included Gugh Wildlife, Narcissi Flower Walk on St Martins, Beaches and Coastlines on St Mary's, Top to Toe on Bryher and Rock Pool Safari on Treasco.

I decided to break myself in gently and on the first evening, I

joined the Astronomy Walk on St Mary's, led by George Tiedeman.

This was graded as easy and involved a gentle stroll through the streets of St Mary's, with necks craned upwards as George regaled us with the stories of the stars.

Initially, clouds had prevented us from seeing anything, so we had moved into the Town Hall to listen to George explain about the different constellations, but fortune was on our side and the clouds disappeared leaving bright, starry



**ABOVE:** The rocky coast at New Grimbsy on Treasco; **BELOW:** Exotic plants at the Abbey Gardens

skies. It was fascinating to learn about Cassiopeia, Orion's Belt, and Ursa Major – the Great Bear, and the stars did seem exceptionally bright. There is much less light pollution on the islands and so star-gazers are privy to more dramatic results and the two-hour walk seemed to pass very quickly.

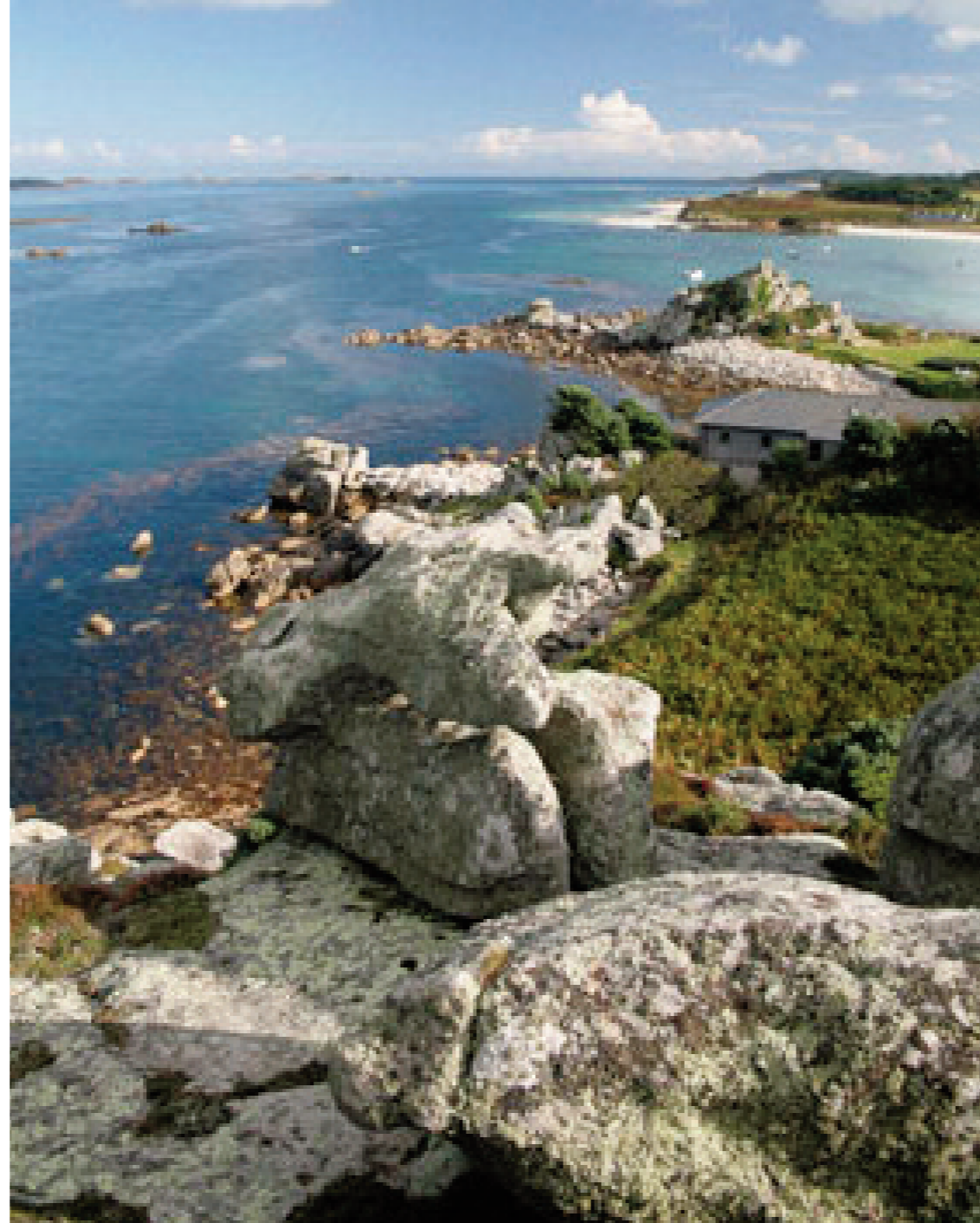
Having seen St Mary's by night, it was great to get out the next day and explore this picturesque island in daylight. The weather was again blustery, with rain showers this time, but undeterred I joined a large group of walkers for Maritime St Mary's, a two-and-a-half hour walk graded as fairly easy, taken by Richard Larn, local maritime historian and international author.

The walk was centred around Hugh Town and included a visit to the Lifeboat House, along with a

plethora of interesting tales about the ships that have been wrecked on Scilly rocks, including the famous Association and three other ships under the command of Sir Cloudesley Shovell. The fleet had stopped nearby to get their bearings, but the navigators got it badly wrong. Believing that the English Channel was clear before him, Sir Cloudesley set off and the four ships struck the Western Rocks, with the loss of about 1,670 men.

This wreck site is one of about 900 around the Scillies, and Richard had many tales to tell as we walked through Hugh Town, stopping at historic buildings and slipways, the harbour, the quay and Town Beach.

With the afternoon free, I set off on my own and enjoyed the one-and-a-half mile Garrison Wall walk. This promontory to the west of



Hugh Town is almost completely encircled by a granite defensive wall, bristling with batteries. The Garrison was developed over three centuries but one of the most significant dates was 1593 when Governor Francis Godolphin built the eight-pointed Star Castle.

During the Civil War, the Garrison was a Royalist stronghold until 1651. These days, there is no longer a garrison here and the Star Castle is a hotel, but it is lovely to take the circular walk and pass mounted cannons and granite archways and enjoy unsurpassed views across the sea to Gugh and St Agnes.

After a second good night's sleep I was ready for Beaches and Moors, a wildlife walk on St Mary's from Holy Vale to Porth Hellick via the pool and nature reserve and led by wildlife expert Will Flagstaff. This was graded as fairly strenuous, with several inclines, and was an excellent two-and-a-half-hour walk that took us much further inland and to the Higher Moors, along a boggy nature trail to Porth Hellick Lake and Porth Hellick beach then back round across the airport and to Old Town. The scenery was undulating and beautiful, even in March, and along the way Will pointed out wildlife, birds in particular, and explained how Scilly wildlife differed from the

**PICTURESQUE:** Beautiful secluded beaches are abundant in the Scilly Isles

mainland. There are few indigenous species, but one such example is the Scilly Shrew, which is tiny and is found nowhere else in the UK. We did get to see a couple of rarities. A cattle egret had made a local allotment its home, while an Icelandic gull was spotted hanging around the local incinerator and scavenging for scraps along with the more common herring gulls.

Throughout the walk Will carried a powerful telescope and stopped wherever there was a good wildlife opportunity and set up the scope for us all to have a look through. We also had plenty of opportunity to admire the scenic views over the moors and across golden beaches to the shimmering blue sea. The air felt clean and fresh and the countryside seemed unpolluted and wonderfully peaceful.

Traffic on the islands is minimal, but it was only when I took a boat across to Treasco for a couple of days that I really understood the tranquillity offered by a traffic-free environment. On Treasco, the privately-owned island estate leased by the Dorrien Smith family, there are no cars other than golf cart-style buggies and shank's pony is the best mode of transport.

I set off first thing in the morning to explore as much of the island on



**TAKE A WALK:** The Scillies offer great walking routes, especially around its many coastlines

**SCENIC:** The pretty harbour at Hugh Town, St Mary's



foot as possible and began by walking along the quiet byways past the peaceful St Nicholas Church, on to the Great Pool and to the Abbey Gardens, truly the jewel in the Tresco crown. Described as 'Kew with the roof off', it contains plants that would not grow well in the open anywhere else in the UK and is a real feast for the eyes.

Stunning Australian scarlet bottle brush, massive Mexican yuccas, prickly pears, Madeira Lily of the Valley trees, Burmese honeysuckle, Aloes, Dracaenas - the list is endless.

A surprise awaits around every corner and behind every hedge, including beautiful sculptures, a gazebo decorated with shells and the Valhalla containing figureheads, cannons and other items from shipwrecks. I sat on a bench and gazed at the striking salvaged artifacts and rested my weary feet for a while, before setting off to explore the rest of the island.


I hiked along Carn Near Road to Carn Quay, and then back along Appletree Road and to New Grimsby, where I stopped for a spot of a delightful lunch at the Flying Boat Club.

With my appetite sated I

continued along the eastern side of the island and hiked upwards onto Beacon Hill which gave me striking views of Cromwell's Castle and King Charles' Castle.

I walked down to take a closer look at both and then continued around the top end of the island, exhilarated by the sea air, the sometimes narrow cliff paths and the feeling of being the only person on earth, as I barely saw another soul.

I loved my walking experience in the Scillies. The festival enables everyone to get involved by providing such a varied timetable of events where you can do as little or as much as you want and can learn about subjects as diverse as astronomy, growing daffodils, wildlife, bats and even ghosts. The islands are beautiful and regular water taxis make it easy to get from one to another - I travelled to St Martins for a tour of a daffodil farm and to Bryher one evening, by moonlight, for a fish and chip supper at the Fraggie Rock pub.

And if you want time away from organised events, then it is easy to find your own walking routes and discover your own little bit of Scillies paradise. 

## Where to stay

### Tregarthen's

With fantastic views over the harbour in St Mary's, Tregarthen's is a friendly, cosy hotel, conveniently situated close to the Quay and offering excellent accommodation.



It has 33 en suite rooms with robes, tea/coffee making facilities and TV. I had a double room with en suite and a small balcony. The restaurant has commanding views across the harbour, which you can admire while savouring tasty full English breakfasts, Cornish cream teas or delicious evening meals. Tempting dishes included Thai fish curry, Cornish rump of lamb and marinated shark steak. The staff at the hotel were very friendly and helpful and with their in depth knowledge of the islands they can arrange fishing or diving trips, bike hire and tours.

**Tregarthen's Hotel, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly**

**Tel 01720 422540 [www.tregarthens-hotel.co.uk](http://www.tregarthens-hotel.co.uk)**

## Further information

**Walk Scilly 2010 is being held from 27 March to 3 April and for a full timetable of events, visit [www.simplyscilly.co.uk](http://www.simplyscilly.co.uk)**