

Summer in the Scillies

Our Moonraker *Topaz* logged 525 miles during a summer week which took her to the unspoilt Scilly Isles. David Glenn joined the boat at Mylor for a long weekend in the islands. Eric Coltham took the pictures.

THE exciting thing about taking *Topaz* to the Scillies last summer was that no one aboard, except myself, had been there before. It was completely new ground.

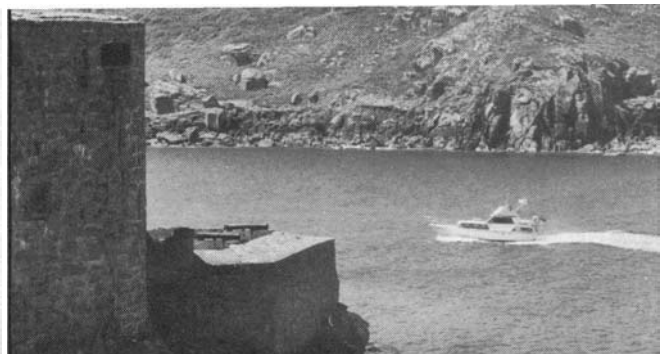
At first it seems incongruous that these beautiful granite islands haven't been overwhelmed by the sort of commercialism which has turned the Channel Islands into such a feverish cruising area, but their very location, 28 miles off Land's End, has kept them nicely isolated from big development.

They are, however, intriguingly cosmopolitan. To the cruising yachtsman the islands make a handy staging post between the Continent and southern Ireland or the Western Isles and most of the visitors are either French or German. Yachts from the UK are, surprisingly, in the minority; even transatlantic Americans sometimes outnumber them.

Nevertheless, someone cruising from the south-west coast of England, or in a reasonably fast motor cruiser from the Solent, may well make their "distance mark" the Scillies. Similarly, it must make a pleasant change for those used to the Bristol Channel or Irish Sea ports.

It's a fair stretch from *Topaz's* berth on the Hamble to St Mary's (the biggest of the islands) and completely impractical to complete the 212 miles in a single passage. So, demonstrating typically neat planning to utilise the magazine's staff to the full, Eric Coltham and myself travelled by road to Falmouth to carry out another assignment while Dick and Liza Hewitt brought the boat from her berth at Mercury. They managed the trip to Dittisham on the Dart in a little under 7,5 hours (averaging 15 knots) and the following day met up with Randal and June Kettle who were to complete the six-strong crew.

Fortified by an excellent dinner at the Carved Angel in Dartmouth the crew took just eight hours to get *Topaz* to the Helford the following day, including a lunch stop in Salcombe. Eric and I boarded *Topaz* at Mylor on the *Fal*, a very convenient crew changeover point with excellent car parking. The only difficulty is the approach channel which isn't well marked and is very shallow at low water.



With the crew now complete we left on the afternoon of 16 June to return to the Helford which would not only reduce the distance of the next day's run but also give us a chance to sample the seafood specialities at the Riverside Restaurant in Helford village. There are several visitor's moorings here (marked with a black cross) although one we tried to pick up was obviously fouled and we were forced to lie some distance from the dinghy pontoon.

The passage from the Helford to the Scillies is about 65 miles and for the navigator the Wolf Rock and its famous lighthouse are ideally placed for a position check. They lay a little to the north of our rhumb line from the Lizard.

There are one or two points worth making about the crossing to the Scillies. If the wind is in the west, north west or north, don't be deceived by the sea state which is likely to exist along the Cornish coast. Once the shelter of the Lizard and Land's End is lost a much larger sea is likely to be running and when we reached this point it was quite obvious that some evil weather was approaching. A long swell kept our

speed pegged to about 12 to 15 knots and with the sea being taken on the starboard bow the motion was awkward.

It's worth rounding the Lizard at slack water or at the end of the-westgoing ebb. This makes it easier to pass the headland and also means that you will arrive in the Scillies on a rising tide. This, of course, depends on one's cruising speed.

Despite the heaving swell we had a fine morning for our passage from the mainland and 1hour 45min after passing the Wolf we arrived at the clean and beautiful anchorage of Cove on St Agnes. The first impression we got of the islands was how small they are - it takes some time to get used to the scale and at first it is easy to misjudge distances and overshoot. Clear water, which allows you to watch your anchor land on a clean, sandy bottom in 20 ft (6 m) of water, is another delight of the islands.

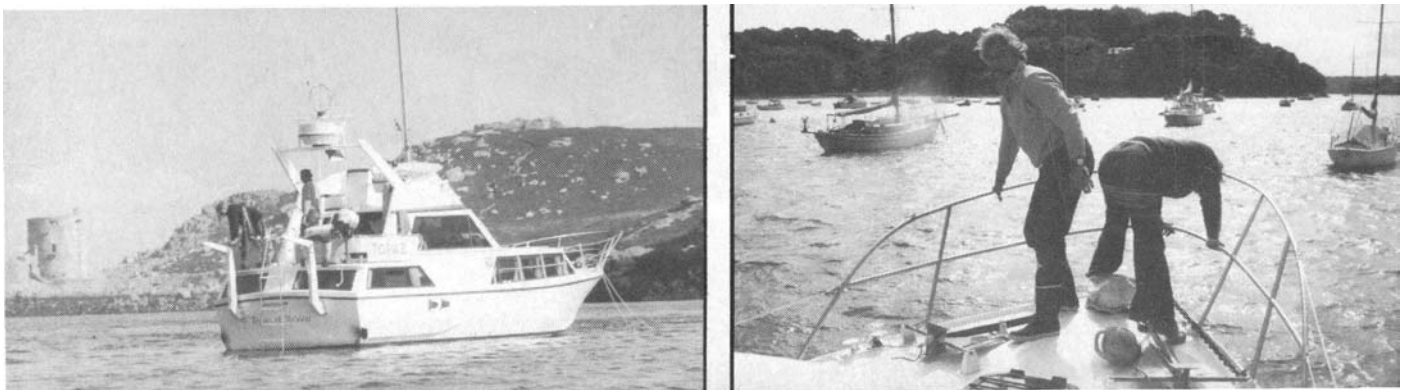
We only poked our nose into Cove on this occasion because we wanted to have a look at Hugh Town on St Mary's and felt there would be better shelter there from the north-easterly gale which was being forecast. As we idled back' to St Mary's we could see some of the weird granite formations on St Agnes which have been sculpted into odd shapes by hundreds of years of erosion. Some of them are named after the objects they resemble, like Victoria's Head and the Nag's Head, and with a history which stretches back to 2000 BC, when the Bronze Age people colonised the Scillies (there are many megalithic tombs still to be seen), it is easy to sense a rather eerie, primitive atmosphere about the place.

There is a choice of harbours at Hugh Town - Porth Cressa to the south and Hugh Town harbour to the north. We chose the former because it offered more shelter. Hugh Town is where the supply ship and ferry *Scillonian* berth and if you do choose to go there be absolutely certain to lie well clear of the main quay. There have been some nasty accidents with the *Scillonian* picking up anchor cables simply because small yachts get too close. Dues are about 72p a night for a 30ft (9m) boat.

Water is available by arrangement with the harbour master, Captain Jim Williams, or his assistant, Arthur Jenkins, and it costs 1p per gallon from a quayside hose. Fuel is also available and is delivered by a road tanker, although there is a garage at the Porth Cressa side for small amounts. It is possible to dry out on the hard sand beach at Hugh Town and H.J.Thomas Marine Engineers and the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company are the people to go to for spares and equipment.

The approach to the quieter and more attractive Porth Cressa anchorage was simple and a course of 350 degrees (T), steering for the wall at the western end of the small beach brought us safely between Wras Rock to port and the Raven Rock to starboard. At high water there seems quite an expanse of usable water for anchoring but at low water much of the eastern side of the small cove dries out. To start with we lay to a single anchor but as the weather didn't look good and more yachts crowded in to find a quiet anchorage for the night we decided another anchor would ensure peace of mind. It is important to remember that the angle between the two cables should be large enough to be effective, but not too large.

Although we felt snugged down for the night the owner of *Sealeaf*, a small yacht nearby, was obviously getting anxious about the proximity of the rocky west shore of the anchorage as the ebb continued. Being short-handed his attempts firstly to lay another anchor and then to weigh both and move were unsuccessful. Our first offer of help was turned down but in the growing dark and increasing wind he called us over and we eventually managed to position him safely. Nevertheless, he probably didn't sleep too soundly that night.



It was blowing so hard from the north east the following morning that we thought about staying in Porth Cressa for another day.

But time was pressing and we wanted some relief from the scenery at Porth Cressa. Having Weighed our two anchors successfully we made our way round the south-west corner of St Mary's and braced ourselves for the blast we would meet once we had cleared the shelter of the islands. In spite of the gale force winds the sea between St Mary's and Tresco was relatively calm although we were told by the local Trinity House representative, Roy Guy, that a big swell can run in from the unprotected southwestern quarter in a

gale and in those conditions it can be difficult to enter Hugh Town in a small boat.

We left for the popular anchorage at New Grimsby, between Bryher and Tresco, at about half flood so that we could see most hazards and take advantage of the north running flood. All went well as we picked up Nut Rock, an inconspicuous lump which has to be left well to port. We then searched for, and soon identified, Hulman Beacon, a dilapidated structure atop a nasty bunch of rocks off Crow Point. We left Hulman Beacon about 30 yards to port and at this stage began to get a little concerned about the depth. Although ruffled by the wind we could easily pick out the bottom through the clear water and it all looked too close for comfort with fronds of weed reaching up from the sand. We recorded a depth of 7ft (2.13m) here, plenty for us but the shallowest patch *en route* for New Grimsby.

Deceptively narrow

Looking north from here it is easy to assume the channel is wide and easy up to the anchorage - it is in fact deceptively narrow except for boats drawing only a couple of feet or so. From Hulman we did a little jink to starboard so that we left the Rag Ledge Beacon to port, thus completing the dog's leg leading to Tresco Flats. We thought the next section could do with a buoy or two to help pilotage. The recognised transit is to keep Merrick Island in line with Hangman's Island but they can be difficult to see against each other especially in a howling wind and a good deal of spray. (We could have done with a set of freshwater windscreen washers on several occasions on this trip).

We carried on along this line until we could lay the anchorage at New Grimsby without getting too close to Plump Rocks. We were astonished that these were not shown on the new Admiralty Chart No. 34 - the old fathoms and feet chart, which is much more detailed, does show the rocks. With Plump Rocks well clear on the starboard bow we followed another recognised transit which clears Plumb Island lying to the north east of Plump Rocks. The spot to steer for is the building at the root of the quay at New Grimsby but this is just a clearing line for Plumb Island and it is best to steer a few degrees to port to bring up comfortably in the anchorage.

The Scilly Isles are owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, but Tresco is unusual because it is leased to the Dorrien Smith family who charge 40p for adults landing at the New Grimsby Quay. This seems only to apply to those arriving by ferry and yachtsmen appear to be exempt if they arrive in their own dinghies and land on the beautiful sandy beach inside the quay.

We were pleased to find good shelter in our new anchorage although the odd down draught came screaming down the steep island shore and sent us swinging on our rope anchor warp. Later, with *Topaz* lying safely to two anchors in about three fathoms, Randal, June and Eric and I motored ashore in the dinghy to explore the island.

Tresco offers an amazing variety of scenery and I decided the only way to see the lot would be to walk right round the island. It's a good three-hour hike, but with the gale lashing Round Island and the dozens of rocks to the north, the scene from the cliffs on the northern shore was magnificent. The Kettles were keen to visit a place which bore their name - Kettle Point off which lay the formidable Kettle Bottom Rock, which has torn the bottom out of many a ship.

Cromwell's Castle is a dominant landmark overlooking the water between Tresco and Bryher. Built in the 1650s it was heavily armed to keep out a fleet of hostile Dutchmen. It was far better positioned than King Charles' Castle further up the hillside, which was too far from the harbour entrance to be of any use during invasions in the 1550s.

From Merchant's Point on the northern shore, right down to Skirt Island and Carn Near I saw just two people as I walked along the clean white sandy beaches snuggled into countless coves. With no car parks (no cars!), ice cream stalls, or deck chair hirers it was getting on for Utopia - the only thing missing was a tropical climate. The interior of the island is just as fascinating with Augustus Smith's famous gardens and the Abbey where he lived.

The islands are teeming with bird life and I saw hundreds of oystercatchers and little stints on the shore line. Unlike mainland birds they seemed quite unperturbed by my presence.

Back on board that evening we saw one of the Scilly Isles gigs being rowed from St Mary's - in fact it turned out to be *Czar*, a 100-year-old boat built of Cornish elm and claimed at one time to be the fastest gig in the islands. These boats were once used to take pilots to sailing ships and to carry cargo from the many vessels which foundered around the Scillies. Now they are used for racing, a weekly event in the summer.

Our anchorage at New Grimsby was a comfortable one for our second night in the islands and the following day we landed on Bryher, an island on which each household has its own generator to supply electricity (similar conditions exist on St Agnes and St Martins). There are very few facilities on this barren, wild island and even some of the pathways across it are hard going.

Driven ashore

We wanted to have a look at the legendary Hell Bay which has been the unplanned destination for many ships driven ashore in westerly gales. Ironically, when we saw this impressive bay, it was as still as a mill-

pond and looked inviting and harmless.

An interesting person to visit on this island is Keith Baret who is one of the very few boatbuilders among the islands. While we were there he was completing a cruising catamaran, and was waiting to do some repair work on a Wharram cat which had been badly damaged during foul weather. She had been poorly built and he was worried about whether he could do much with her. He has built many catamarans for islanders, who use them for ferries between the island. They are obviously popular because short cuts can be taken with the shallow draught and they can be beached easily.

We told Keith that we were due to leave that afternoon and would be departing through the northern entrance to New Grimsby Harbour and then turning south west. He warned us about Kettle Bottom Rocks if ever we went north east and said that the recognised clearing line for the rocks - keeping Shipman Head open of Scilly Rock - was not ideal. He said that keeping Maiden Bower Rock (beyond Scilly Rock) open with Shipman would give better clearance.

We duly left on a brilliant sunny afternoon and having rounded Shipman steered to leave Scilly Rock to starboard. We were hoping to see some seals on these rocks but they didn't oblige us that afternoon. With a confused sea coming up behind us (the left-overs from the gale) we slowly motored down to leave Maiden Bower to port before turning rather reluctantly into the wide North Channel leading down to Annet and St Agnes. Reluctantly because we would have liked to visit the famous Bishop Rock which lies about 1,5 miles west of the Western Rocks - time simply didn't allow it.

Leaving Mincarlo well to port (Biggal Ledge and Castinicks are two nasty little low rocks running in a south-easterly line from Mincarlo) we headed down the North Channel aiming for the black conical Old Wreck Rock buoy which is not at all easy to see against the mass of rocks off the northern end of Annet. However, we eventually did locate it and then altered course to port to pass between St Agnes and Annet, to arrive in Smith Sound at the southern end of the passage.

It is advisable to stand on along the course through Smith Sound until the island of Melledgan (to starboard) is almost abeam before altering to port so that the Lethagus Rocks and Wingletang Ledges are avoided. We were heading for Cove again, this time to spend our final night there. It is a fascinating anchorage because of the narrow beach-cum-causeway which still connects the island of St Agnes and Gough, the more easterly island. The beach dries almost five metres and acts as a protective breakwater for the Cove anchorage when the wind is in the north west.

Topaz lay with just one other boat in this lovely anchorage while the crew went ashore and walked around the island. I couldn't resist a swim in the crystal clear water, warmed by the sun-baked beach. There is a disused lighthouse right in the middle of St Agnes island which is useful for the approach to the Scillies, and another attraction is the Turks Head Inn which is near the quay in the northern anchorage called Porth Conger. It is renowned for a good sing song, and boat loads come in from St Mary's on a summer evening for a bit of jollity.

Eric and I scrambled up Kittern Hill on Gough from where there is a fabulous view of Porth Conger to the south west and the impressive Bow Ledges to the north west, with St Mary's beyond.

The next day our whistle-stop cruise of the Scillies drew to a close and we were up at the crack of dawn (at least some of us were) to weigh anchor at 0505. It was a magnificent morning with barely a breath of wind and not a cloud in the sky - perfect motor boat cruising weather. Running at 2000rpm on a co use of 085 degrees (M) we sped from the islands in a glassy calm and we were alongside at Mylor by 1000. Basking sharks and the odd fisherman feathering for mackerel were the only signs of life we saw during the passage.

Looking back at our visit there are one or two general points worth making about taking a motor cruiser to the Scillies. Firstly make sure your anchors (it is essential to have two, preferably three), cable and other ground tackle are complete and in good condition. Remember that Hugh Town is the only place where fuel and water can be obtained in quantity, and it is the only place where a boat can lie alongside a quay. A dinghy is essential for visiting other islands and an outboard avoids a slogging row against or across tides, which can run fast in places. Always be on the look-out for a change in the weather which might make a cosy anchorage a potentially disastrous one. Early closing in Hugh Town is normally on Wednesdays and the following Scillonia phone numbers are worth noting: Harbour Office 768, Customs 571, Coastguard 651 and the doctor (who travels by launch around the islands) 628.

At Mylor Eric and I had to leave *Topaz*, and Dick Hewitt and the rest of his crew took her back to the Hamble.

For those planning a cruise to the Scillies it might be useful and interesting to note that in *Topaz's* week long cruise she covered a total distance of 525.1 miles, spent 45 hours under way at an average speed of 11.67 knots and consumed 259 gallons of fuel. That works out at about 5.75 gallons per hour for the whole cruise although for the passages to and from the Scillies fuel consumption was a more expensive 10 gallons per hour.