

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Scilly lies about 28 miles from Land's End. This is not a great distance from the mainland and indeed Land's End can easily be seen from Scilly in clear weather. But the islands are out in the ocean and, to this day, many 'mainlanders' do not know of the existence of this beautiful archipelago. The Isles of Scilly are made up of over 50 islands and hundreds of drying rocks although only five are inhabited permanently and one more, Gugh, has just two holiday houses. There is often confusion because of duplication in the names of islands, rocks, villages and bays; there are, for example, no less than twelve rocks named 'Round Rock', five named Biggal and four called 'Tearing Ledge'. Local terminology needs some explanation, in particular two widely used words; 'Porth' means bay and 'Carn' correlates with Cairn or Tor. It is about nine and a half miles from the Bishop Rock Light, at the SW extremity of Scilly to the N of White Island at the NE of the isles and about five miles across from the outer limit of the Norrard Rocks to the south coast of St Mary's. The total 'year round' population of Scilly is little over 2,000, the vast majority living on St Mary's, but the numbers are swelled by the many visitors, particularly in the summer season.

There has been human life on the islands for at least 4,000 years evidenced by the many burial chambers from the pre-bronze age period. The inhabitants of the islands now make their living primarily from tourism but horticulture, fishing and crafts still play their part. In the past fishing, boat building, kelping and, most famously, pilotage and salvage all featured at different times in the islands' history. Two themes have been fairly constant. The first has been an intimate relationship with the sea; to this day the seamen of Scilly are renowned for their courage and seamanship. The second is the need for initiative and resourcefulness to cope in an environment where sourcing materials and expertise is not as straightforward as it might be on the mainland.

Until early in the 20th century even the tax man was not prepared to force his attentions on the inhabitants. From Redruth in Cornwall income tax was assessed on Scilly dwellers but no effort was made to enforce collection. If, before the arrival of air transport, the tax man did not wish to attempt the passage to Scilly by boat, he was probably also influenced by the lack of protected harbours when he did arrive.

Most UK-registered yachts arrive in the Isles of Scilly from nearby home ports in Cornwall or Devon, their owners making their annual



**Scillonian III**  
arriving at the  
busy quay, St  
Mary's  
*David Lomax*

pilgrimage to their favourite offshore islands. Perhaps the lack of British yachts from further afield is due to the substantial distance to Scilly from major yachting centres, limitations on time available for the return passage and the difficulty in finding a suitable weather window. Those who persevere with the trip to Scilly, however, will be rewarded by some of the most beautiful scenery in all England, together with bird-life and flowers of an unrivalled nature.

In recent years there has been an abundance of foreign yachts and French-flag vessels now account for about sixty per cent of all arrivals in the islands, outnumbering even the British yachts. The next largest group of visiting yachts come from Ireland followed by Dutch, German and Belgian flags which appear in about equal numbers. The busiest time of the year is from the beginning of June to the end of September with a peak in July and August but it is a long period of settled weather which brings the largest influx of yachts and in a poor summer the numbers fall away noticeably. For many of the foreign-flag vessels, Scilly is a staging post on the way to more distant destinations. For example, many French yachts are bound for southern Ireland and, conversely Irish yachts are bound for Brittany.



**An outboard  
motor casing put  
to good use!**



### Pilotage in the Isles of Scilly

It is best to arrange the final approach to Scilly so as to allow enough time to anchor in daylight. All other arrangements and plans for making a visit to Scilly should be made with this in mind. Because the islands are so low (with no land higher than 46 metres) the recognition of visual marks is especially important. For this reason navigators should carry, and be prepared to use, an accurate hand-bearing compass, a good pair of binoculars and up-to-date large-scale charts. With such basic equipment, competent navigators can manage without electronic aids when sailing in and around Scilly, although most sailors will find a depth gauge, radar, and GPS or a chart plotter to be helpful when approaching and cruising around the islands.

The Isles of Scilly are in effect a plateau and, when clear of the islands, the depths are universally in excess of 50m. In poor visibility a reliable depth sounder is a useful navigational tool. It should be noted however that once the 50m contour is crossed the seabed can rise steeply to dangerously shoal depths.

The seamen of Scilly have themselves long used daymarks and transits for navigation and, in conditions where strong winds and tides often prevail, such immovable objects are reliable navigational tools. Careful observation not only enables one to check position fixes obtained electronically, but also aids recognition of and familiarity with the geography, both of which are fundamental to safe pilotage.

There is a lot of shoal water among the islands, and submerged rocks and sandbanks are everywhere. Fortunately, the area is well charted but many of the hazards are not marked by buoys or beacons and may only be visible at LW. The golden rule when sailing among the

islands is to do so on a flood tide, ideally after half tide. Individual yachtsmen, however, must make their own assessment of conditions as barometric pressure, among other factors, can have a great affect on sea level.

Another point to bear in mind when navigating among these islands is: 'never follow the ferries'. Despite their size (some are over 20 metres long) they are all very shallow-draught, the boatmen know the waters intimately and they are accustomed to skimming over sandbanks with just enough water beneath their keel.

### Transits and bearings of reference

Transits are widely used in this guide and the importance of steering to offset leeway and tidal streams when using transits cannot be overemphasised. Never leave an inexperienced person on the helm to look over their shoulder at a stern transit in a strong cross tide! In Scilly they will soon find the bottom.

**A rare treat – at anchor off the Western Rocks on a calm day**  
Mike Lewin-Harris

**Rocks off Annet Head**

