

SKOKHOLM ISLAND BIRD OBSERVATORY - 1959 and 1960

By Martie Glover nee Volkov

What memories still remain of my two seasons as cook at the Bird Observatory on Skokholm after more than 50 years? I must admit that they are somewhat dream-like now. People and birds and the beauty of the place remain, and not in any particular order as they say. .And the fresh air – all that fresh air! We called it Strong Air to explain how different it was to visitors not used to it.

The visitors would arrive on a Saturday in the Cubango, the open ship's lifeboat, skippered by Harold Sturley , our much respected and loved boatman who inspired confidence even on the roughest crossings. The Cubango was met at the quay in South Haven, by the staff and of course any visitors who were leaving that day. Lighthouse Men would bring down their dumper from their Light House at the other end of the island, to help with visitors' luggage. Their help was vital to us in many ways. They transported the provisions arriving for the week to come and those extra stores to keep us stocked up in case bad weather stopped the boat coming on the regular day . They also helped to carry the metal cans of drinking water from the well. And as we got to know them, they became good friends.

The Staff in 1959 were Kate Barham, Warden and Robin Wilson , Sub Warden and myself. In 1960 Ken Smith was Warden and Ian Downhill , Sub Warden. We arrived in early March or late February to get the place clean and tidy after the ravishes of Winter. Walls would need to be washed down and the Sub Warden had to dig a new pit for the Elsan toilet waste – our mod.con. Our drinking water came from the well and our washing water from the rain water butts..

Warden and Sub Warden had their rooms in the Cottage while I had the Goat House,

a dear little square building half way to the Wheel House. The Wheel House was so called because of the large ship's wheel hanging on the end Wall. It acted as kitchen and dining room, with a long table and benches down the middle, and a Calor gas cooker. This was my domain.

New visitors, numbering ten to twelve, would sit around the table for the Warden's introduction to the island. They were warned of the safety precautions. The main one I remember was to watch out for rabbit holes, not only for their own safety, but because both puffins and Shearwaters used the holes as nest sites. They were also warned to keep away from the cliff tops in windy weather. The gusts could snatch at you dangerously, but could be just as treacherous if you were leaning into the wind when it suddenly dropped.. And Kate would tell them to clean any cuts or scratches very carefully. The visitors were trusted to have a normally good sense of self-preservation and common sense and very few mishaps occurred. Kate herself was air lifted off the island the year before I arrived. She had been to Grassholm to ring Gannets, a rare occurrence. Her arm turned black a few days later from a scratch of a gannet's claw. The Lighthouse men called for help by radio – our only means of communication with the mainland in those days. A helicopter came to the rescue. It was good to know that the life-line worked..

The visitors were great. They talked about birds, and more birds and then yet still more birds for the whole week. I loved their enthusiasm. They spent the days walking around the island, exploring and recording what they saw; or driving the Heligoland trap next to the cottage. This was especially exciting during migrations when you never knew what would arrive, but to see the familiar birds in the hand was also a thrill. Work in the Ringing Room was very interesting. We also ringed the young auks, puffins from their burrows and razorbills from among the rocks on

the cliffs. Though there were guillemots I think their nests were inaccessible; or it is possible we could not have reached the chicks without frightening them too much. We ringed any other chicks found on the island, pipits and skylarks, oystercatchers and lapwings and herring and lesser blacked backed gulls. I remember Robin climbing down a cliff to a Raven's nest to the fledglings with wonderful red gorges.

Night time was another story. We would go out with torches to find the Shearwaters about to leave for their turn on the fishing ground or arriving home. They preferred a dark night which helped them to reach their burrows more safely. I hated the Greater Black Backed Gulls who would take them if at all possible, leaving only their wings as evidence. The cacophony of their calls was like nothing else normally heard - the nearest to it I have heard is a nursery full of hungry babies wailing for their mums in the early morning in a big maternity hospital in the 1960s.

The visitors varied widely. The young lads had endless energy. Many were very knowledgeable and with very wide experience of birds. I remember John Stott from All Souls in Langham Place and Kenneth Williamson and Ted Storey. In 1959 we had an Anniversary - Fifty years of Bird Ringing. Julian Huxley and James Fisher came. And Jeffrey Boswall and Tony Soper of the BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol. Possibly they have a record of the event? Chris Milne came more than once to film for the BBC. (It is great to see him on Spring Watch.). David Stanbury brought his school classes.

In 1960 there was an awful tragedy. One day, mid-week, Harold was on his way in the Cubango to the Island to renew a mooring ring in the rocks on the edge of North Haven. We rarely needed to use this but would if the wind prevented our use of South

Haven. In the event, the Royal Naval Station on St Anne's Head was allowing their men to shoot out to sea with rifles. Harold would have been a long way out but was still hit in the neck by a bullet. He fell and died there in the boat. With him was a young employee from Dale Fort, a girl who must have turned the boat back to the Fort. No one from the Naval Station even visited Harold's widow.. It was an awful blow to Dale Fort too.. As far as I remember, John Barrett skippered the Cubango after that.

We all worked very hard. I baked all our own bread and cakes and puddings, as well as the savoury dishes. The visitors were a happy lot. I would ring a loud traditional dinner bell and in they would flock. My job was made possible by their peeling the potatoes and washing up cheerfully and without grumbles. They also looked after their own rooms.

We used the eggs of the herring and lesser Black backed gulls. These were taken when first laid and were preserved in izing-glass. They tasted very much like ordinary hens' eggs, though the whites may have been rather less viscous and of course they were much bigger.. Occasionally we would eat fresh rabbit. I think the Men from the Ministry of Agriculture must have shot them and taught me how to skin them. The men, Hugh Lloyd and Dan McGowan, came to study the dense population of rabbits. They were interested in what happened when the numbers increased unabated in 1959, but were also interested when the population crashed during the winter between 1959/60 for some unclear reason – apparently not smyxomatosis. .

I also had a piglet each year to fatten up on the scraps. The first, Benedict became such a pet that it broke my heart to let him go. He was as friendly as a dog I was

careful not to become so attached to the second one, Bernard.

Whenever possible I would join in with Bird work. It was one of my jobs the first year to find and record Lapwings' nests in the marshy Bog area in the middle of the island. It fascinated me to see how the birds took no apparent notice of most gulls flying over the area, but an occasional herring gull nesting in the neighbouring bracken, colony would cause a band of lapwing and oystercatchers to rise up all together, cooperating in a fury to chase it off. I did not know whether they recognised its behaviour, not obvious to me, or whether they recognised a particular marauder.

Specially memorable moments were those of surprise. The little flock of Lapland buntings I spotted through the little window, behind the wheelhouse, one male in the most stunning black and white plumage. The skylark nestling, still hiding in the herbage, bejewelled with a mixture of colours - and again the skylark, so often heard way above us, not recognised by me when first seen resting on a fence post. Then there was the time when I rushed into Robin with bird book in hand and said there was a bird with a red head in North Haven. The only possible picture in the Collins bird book was at the bottom among the vagrants. It was indeed a Red Headed Bunting. We found it again moving happily up and down a gully, feeding. It stayed several days. Though Ken Smith the following year said he thought it might have been an escaped cage bird, there was nothing in its behaviour which indicated this. And the Hoopoe, so exotic, came each year apparently on its way to Ireland. And then the night in late summer when we bathed in the niddy in South Haven. The sea was alight with phosphorescence and as we moved the light streamed off our arms and fingers. It was truly magical.

Grassholm . Very rarely the weather would allow the sea to calm to a glassy, almost oily calm. This would be called a Grassholm day, for it was only in such conditions that the Cubango would set out to take us to that distant island. We would put our full water cans in the boat – these would be the first thing landed on Grassholm as there was no fresh water there. There was always a chance that a swell would get up which would make it difficult to get us off the island again. When we got there the Cubango would slide into a small gully and we would leap for the shore. The gannets in their raised nests so regularly spaced one from the other, filled the air with noise and the pungent smell. We edged our way to the side of the colony and could grab a sitting bird around the neck and hug its bulky wings and body to us until it was ringed. It was exciting work. After Kate's experience we washed any scratches very thoroughly in the broad Atlantic on the way home! The only time I got there was in 1959.

Every evening we all, guests and staff, collected in the Common Room. This was the main room in the cottage; we squeezed in to hear the Log being read out. Everything seen that day was carefully recorded. It was good to have the opportunity to feel part of the work. All contributed to it.

My 21st birthday was spent on Skokholm with family and friends who came over for that week. That and many other happy memories of people and wild life and lots of exciting activity have put it among the lucky and fortunate times in my life..

There were Soay sheep on the island the first year. I think R. M. Lockley must have introduced them when he farmed the island before the Second World War. They did not in any way worry us. But someone decided they needed to be culled. The only time I met Lockley was when he brought a band of men with guns to the island. Not knowing the whys or the wherefores of the plan, I think we were all horrified when the men proceeded to shoot every single one of the sheep. I think this must have occurred before the visitors first arrived in early 1960.