

'A post-war expedition'  
(23 March 1946)

by Ronald Lockley

On Saturday, March the 23rd 1946, at 10 a.m., the first swallow flew over Martinshaven - an early bird. It was a promise of what was to come, and a fresh inspiration to the hard-working members of the assault party. We strove far into the night to finish the mainland task. There was only a week left before the first arrivals were due at Skomer - a party of students from Bristol University. It was high time we got over to the island, and began the restoration of the house there. We wondered, too, if the wheatears had arrived.

On the Sunday afternoon we agreed to abandon work at Martinshaven and cross to Skomer - ostensibly to make lists of our requirements for the renovations. Actually we were all tired out and glad of the outing. We launched the Storm Petrel, the eighteen-foot open boat loaned by R.M.L., and with a new outboard engine at her stern we were quickly across the white tides of Jack Sound and into Skomer North Haven. We ran the Storm Petrel on the rough pebbles and pulled her up half way. A singing wren greeted us as we pushed up through the dead bracken and weeds which sprawled over the ancient track leading to the plateau. This was formerly wide enough for a horse and cart but now heaps of sandy soil alternated with holes to make any vehicular traffic impossible. The concrete ramp too, connecting the road with the beach, had been partly washed away by storm tides.

We climbed out of the shadows of this north-facing haven until we found the sun shining upon the wide green plateau. On each of the outcropping rocks which formed natural cairns and castles, a pair of gulls rested, great black-backed reluctantly taking to the air when we drew too near. Ravens flew overhead, and buzzards soared in the calm air. Everywhere rabbits were feeding or running to the cover of the rain-washed dead brown bracken. Fields, partly covered with bracken, or with fine closely grazed turf, separated us from the old homestead of Skomer, which stood, uncared for and desolate, with the sun sinking behind it and the sky red with a fine-weather look.

Dilapidated and ruined it had seemed at a distance, and as we drew nearer we found this impression by no means unjust. Doors, gates and windows were broken, missing, or roughly barred over. A heavy veranda helped to darken the front of the house, its iron- and woodwork rusted and decayed.

The house had been abandoned soon after the outbreak of war and had scarcely been touched since. It was amazing to find it fully furnished with a good deal of antique or at least valuable-seeming covered with mildew, dust and dirt. Great canvases stood upon the walls or were fallen from them, their subjects hidden by a thick growth of mould fungus. There was no water laid on and no light- both these systems had completely broken down.

It was all very depressing. We should have to clear and stack this furniture until it could be disposed of. We should have to admit light, warmth and air

into the house by repairing windows and fitting stoves and making fires. We should have to whitewash and distemper and get our simple A.R.P. equipment fitted into these rooms; and it

Yet as we grumbled at the size of the task, we were all of us confident we could achieve it. We measured and surveyed and estimated. The buoyancy that comes of good comradeship in a common task gradually uplifted our spirits as we moved back to the beach and arranged the details of the attack.

THE ISLAND OF SKOMER John Buxton and R.M. Lockley Eds (1950)