

A Visit to Skomer 1903

By the Vicar of St Martins Haverfordwest
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Always have I felt the reproach that I have not visited all my parish, for there lay in the Atlantic a little island which all the billows of the mighty ocean have not succeeded in wiping out of the Parish of S. Martin. It vexed me like a bit of gravel in one's boot. Why it is in the Parish when it is right out in the sea and separated by 14 miles of roadway, you must ask Mr Johnny Phillips or some other learned authority, but in the Parish it is and I have been 5 years meaning to visit it, and have only yesterday – May 22nd – succeeded in doing it.

In these days of motor cars and obliging friends it is so much easier to make a distant and difficult visit than it was for my predecessors, so I am venturing to think that I am the first vicar for a considerable time that has paid this romantic island a visit, and more probably still, the first Vicar to have baptised a little parishioner on it.

Of the journey down nothing special need be said as we tore between the green hedges blazing like fire with gorse and radiant with campion, but on the little beach called St Martin's Haven- from its name we seemed on home ground- there awaited us, for we were four in all, a boat of some substance, for it is needed, as we found on our homeward journey, and a couple of boatman.

The outward voyage just on 2 miles was safely made, with very considerable rowing. One has 'mainland' island on the south, and Skokholm peeping away beyond it and the sides of Skomer were soon sheltering us from the roll. We landed just by The Neck which unites the northern and southern parts of the island, running the boat up on the stony beach. The air was balmy and full of the scent of flowers, and the sweep of the side of the island was a purple haze of bluebells. There is but one house on the island, where the gamekeeper lives, and where the tenant of Lord Kensington Mr Neale of shipping fame, has his quarters. Mr Neale is a passionate enthusiast over birds, and perhaps knows about as much of the seabird as any living authority, and on the island he or his sons spend a good deal of time. Else there is but the gamekeeper and his wife and their four little children.

As the reader may imagine the sea voyage had created a considerable appetite, so we made our luncheon with great appreciation, lying at the foot of a crag with the most glorious view of St Bride's Bay before us; Ramsey lying away on the distant horn, separated from the mainland by its rushing Sound.

After luncheon we were taken by two of Mr Neale's sons to be shown two golden eagles which his father was rearing; magnificent birds, kings of the feathered world, chafing doubtless at their confinement but kept there for fear of the damage they would do should they leave the island and prey on the sheep and lambs of the mainland.

Then we started to explore and reached the most northern point- the island by the way is about 3 miles in length. The views of the distant coast, the cliff scenery, the Atlantic pelting against the rocks, two or three hundred feet below, the birds of every species wheeling, screaming, building, nesting – all of it gave one a feeling of wonderful delight. One felt one was out in the midst of God Almighty's own world, which no man had tampered with or spoiled.

It is a real bird land this island of Skomer. We saw gulls and puffins without number, oystercatchers, 'popples' and ever so many more, which I am not ornithologist enough to recognise or describe. Here you get hawks and bustards, falcons and ravens, we heard the voice of the pheasant, and saw the broken egg shells where the mischievous jackdaws or the carrion crow had left traces of their theft, having first robbed some sister bird's nest, eaten the contents, and like modern trippers left the fragments of their feast.

There came what seemed like a serious adventure, though it was ridiculous enough too, considering the size of the island. A fog, dense enough to hide the sea almost at the base of the cliffs had blown over the land from the Southwest. All traces of where we wanted to get were blotted out, after an hour and a half we were completely lost. We tried in vain to get back to the farmhouse, and it might well have been that we should have been there yet- if the fog had not lifted- had not the Messrs Neale come out to look for us. They started one south and the other north and shot off their guns. Guided by the sound at last we found them, or they us, and so back safely to the farm.

Then an unexpected and to me intensely delightful experience occurred. I had not paid yet a visit to the farm itself to my parishioners. I did so receiving a kindly welcome, and there I found a little baby unbaptised and the mother desiring baptism for it. So without prayer book or vestment with a bowl of water on the kitchen table the little Baby of the Island was received into the arms of the Blessed Saviour and William Eustace was made 'a member of Christ, the Child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven'.

The homeward journey was made through the fog-laden air and this I frankly confess the least pleasing feature, for as we neared 'Jack Sound', which lies between the Islands, the water was roaring through like a mill race. One was in the midst of seething billowy waters, tearing out to the mighty ocean which seemed to boil around our craft. The boatmen made nothing of it but pulled on their oars with a dogged stubbornness till we were out in smooth waters again. They told me afterwards that the 'race' was nothing- absolutely nothing- that afternoon, but that sometimes the water would be dashing into the boat on either side, and then they would have to look about them.

I couldn't have been accompanied with better companions than I was, namely the Reverend Harry Morgan of St Brides, Messrs T Y Lewis, and John Phillips. They have between them a store of natural history, archaeological lore, and everything else that an ignorant person like myself needed to know, and if ever Skomer is formed into a Diocese and I am made bishop of it, I will make the Reverend H Morgan my Archdeacon of it, Mr Lewis my Chancellor, and Mr John Phillips Registrar; and the seabirds at any rate and the flowers

and the cliffs will have three officers to understand their nature and their requirements.