

Skomer: the First Wardenship

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Such a good idea at the time

Supply and demand

Blizzards, boats and babies

Crises and northerlies

Time and tide

All things considered

Such a good idea at the time

The infamous , stricken oil tanker, Sea Empress lay close, only late the previous night being safely moored against the deserted Esso jetty here in Milford haven.

From my window the following morning, overlooking a mirror-like sea, I watched the island boat skim through her disgorging oil slicks, carrying the wardens, a little earlier than usual, to Skomer and Skokholm. The all consuming anxiety occupying so much of our thoughts then, coupled with the wondrous prospect of the coming spring, revived almost forgotten memories of our own involvement with the Pembrokeshire islands, bringing them flooding into my mind.

Thirty six years before, almost to the day, it would have been us setting off for our new life on Skomer Island.

The oil giants held only a tentative toe in the waters then, with BP pumping its oil away to Swansea and Esso still in the process of building the same jetty at which, in 1996, they safely bled the Empress dry of her remaining cargo.

Our parents had never really understood David's passion for birdwatching and a million miles away in deepest Gloucestershire they couldn't comprehend what we were doing in Pembrokeshire either. When in our teens birdwatching had yet to become fashionable, so was not truly acceptable to them as a "normal" hobby and, besides, they mistrusted our reasons for cavorting on bicycles around the Gloucestershire lanes and woodlands. My parent's wide-eyes on our late return home after discovering nightjars bordered on triumphant disbelief, convinced their "nice" daughter had been ruined forever.

In that decade, by leaving civilisation to live on Skomer Island we missed the golden, swinging age of rock and roll, the birth of the Beatles and flower people, traversing from an age of innocence and two lane highways into a freedom and liberty all our own.

Visitors to the island then were a fraction of today's and the need of a strict time table for the boat had not arisen; the boatman, a law unto himself in those halcyon days would not guarantee a daily service. He was of the singular opinion that the uncertainty of not knowing whether you would get to Skomer at all added to the excitement. While this must have been a nightmare for visitors hoping to cross to the island, for we islanders it was a special period in time to be warden. For, even on sumptuous summer days, if he decided his boat needed the shelter and safety of Milford Haven, he would be gone - at a moment's notice - leaving us and that magical place to ourselves.

Among the myriad of advice whispered to us in those early days it appeared that the absolute essential for a happy island existence was a good milking goat. Especially for two people on an otherwise uninhabited, isolated one such as Skomer, with no 'fridge, and no boat permanently on station. I say uninhabited in the loosest term because, of course, we were accompanied by neighbours such as most of us can only dream; thousands upon thousands of sea birds and in the ocean around, grey seals, dolphins and countless wildlife. An island which, in summer, must be the most

beautiful in the known world with its acres of heavenly scented bluebells and wild flowers. Set among tormented seas of spring and autumn it possessed a grandeur and wildness defying belief.

It was this very wildness that had caused the concern for our welfare.

Milk, it seemed, would keep starvation from our door in an emergency - having no radio or telephone to summon help - for this was 1960 and the miracles of silicone chips and VHF radio waves were yet to become reality. Our survival aids, donated by the local coastguards, comprised six distress flares, safely under my husband's desk, plus a supply of old tractor tyres and wellingtons to be burned as an enormous smoky fire which would, without fail, attract attention from the mainland. Only good fortune made us have no need of them, until an emergency occurred five years later which tested their viability, when we discovered this method to be about as useful as shouting from the clifftop through a loud hailer.

Of course all of this was in the future, unknown, as in all innocence we followed that good advice, scouring the literature for a " good milking goat." In the leaflet we received from the prize winning stud she looked delightful; pure white with a crumpled horn, (one had been disbudded), in kid and, with "a lovely temperament". Grazing would be plentiful, she would be more or less self sufficient, requiring only a shelter for bad weather. We were assured she would be excellent company and her milk would be far better for us than " that tinned stuff".

Nowadays they don't transport unaccompanied livestock on trains but, in that glorious summer of 1960 it was the simplest thing to arrange, especially under the circumstances, and we awaited her arrival with hopeful expectation. Apparently we needed no further tuition, for Amy, as we subsequently named her, would know what to do and besides, she would be delivered complete with a comprehensive instruction booklet to Haverfordwest station the following week, as a parcel.

It all seemed such a good idea at the time.

The telephone message to our employer, on the mainland, had been garbled but there was no doubting the urgency and panic in the parcels office manager's voice.

" Haverfordwest station here. For Gods sake, boy, get your goat out from here -- She's eating all my labels!"

So, that very afternoon, Amy, the only ticketed item in the parcels office to have a full complement of identifying paperwork, was duly collected and happily spent the next five days consuming every blade of grass on his lawn. Her bacon, or whatever the goat equivalent might be, only saved by a break in the weather when she could be safely escorted, on one of those wonderful days when the sea sparkled blue with summer, to Skomer.

We weren't sure whether it was her diet of cardboard at the station or the traumas of train and boat journey, but two days later Amy gave birth to twins.

Her previous owner could not possibly have guessed our timorous natures, for

our first attempt at milking proved disastrous and, by popular vote, our last. Amy knew what to do alright - kick those legs about a bit, wave that weapon fixed to your head, walk away and they'll soon leave you alone! Her strategy worked like a dream and opening a tin had never seemed so easy, or more hygienic, was heaven by comparison and we raised two, of our three, children on "that tinned stuff".

We discovered Amy's addiction the following year while my parents were staying with us. I hadn't long given birth to our son when it became apparent that Amy's crumpled horn was still growing and twisting straight for her skull. From our resurrected crumpled instruction manual we were assured the operation would be simple, needing only a sharp hacksaw, a firm grip and a distraction for Amy - she wouldn't feel a thing! We already knew her love of toffees learned in the course of normal animal husbandry - but on this occasion we felt she deserved something a little more delectable.

Oats? Biscuits? Delicious fresh brambles, thistles? But these she nervously devoured long before the operation had begun!

In those days, before we were aware of the dangers and evils of smoking, cigarettes were laden from tip to tip with tobacco. My mother, not approving of alcohol, did enjoy a cigarette or two and she did look upon her wickedness as just one of life's little pleasures. Standing close this traumatic morning, feeling no little sympathy for Amy and under some stress herself, she mockingly offered a nicotine loaded piece of paper to Amy who, with the greedy eagerness of a vacuum cleaner and, before you could have shouted, "tobacco can damage your health!", had totally consumed the cigarettes complete with their packet.

Ever afterwards my parents saved all their "ends", bringing a large consignment whenever they came to stay and horn trimming no longer held any fears for Amy. In fact we felt certain she welcomed the activity as one of life's little pleasures.

She did have, though, a "lovely temperament" and seemed genuinely fond of us, following us with her offspring about the island like pets but, whether this was due more of wanting to be with us or from fear of being left behind we weren't quite certain.

She bleated a lot on these walks and she bleated pitifully when her boisterous twins were large enough to be given to another enthusiast. By then our own children, putting human emotions into the equation and convinced she needed a companion, persuaded us, much against our better judgement, to adopt a waif from the flock on nearby Skokholm. So it happened that one other sparkling day we reached the tranquility of North Haven, after a visit to our neighbours, accompanied by a black and white bundle of, thankfully, horn-less billy goat kid.

Amos would grow into an enormous heap of affectionate and loving odour which no one other than ourselves could understand or accept.

Later, she and Amos produced two more kids, perfect mirror images of her, but she had developed this obsession of not wanting us out of her sight; perhaps she feared we might return with another Amos! Anyway, our small herd took a fancy to sleeping

near the house - her cosy shelter had been spurned long ago- and somehow derived great pleasure by scraping their backs vigourously against the timber walls. Because we had no fear of intruders the front door, with a simple push catch, never needed to be locked, until, that is, one awful night when the family discovered they could get into the house as well! It goes without saying they had a severe reprimand but it was a trick long remembered, exploited to the full, one day while we were away on the island of Grassholm.

Without a care in the world David, myself with Robert and Rachel, our growing children, (Catherine was yet to come) had been invited to make up the numbers on the boat to Grassholm and had spent a wonderful day around the islands. Those trips were always wonderful - sunny, calm, the sea blue and boundless, with picnics among thrift and meadow flowers; bluebelled perfume all around, puffins in the air, razorbills, the sound of kittiwakes on the cliffs and guillemots trumpeting their joy to be ashore.

We arrived home, tired and sunburned, hungry after a day in the fresh sea air, waving farewell to our friends with promises for our next trip.

Glowing in the early evening light the island was alive with the nightly gatherings of seabirds and, our usual group of puffins, like a soldiers platoon lined up neatly spaced for inspection along the ridge of the house, awaited us; the goats browsed gently along the slopes, with not a guilty conscience among them as we reached the front door - open.

Had we at last been victims of house-breaking? Impossible! We dreaded the thought, dropping our bags hurrying into the study and sitting room overlooking the clifftop with it's colony of puffins peacefully ashore. A scene of sheer havoc awaited us but this had been no human invasion - the evidence perfectly clear. Cushions and curtains had been chewed and gnawed, pulled to the floor to lay amidst books, dragged and ripped from the shelves by their spines, torn and mutilated with the agony of goat droppings trampled into the rugs. Absolute devastation.

We rushed outside for the culprits --to find not a single goat in sight!

In the dining room a puffin had come down the chimney.

Exclaiming his despoiled white front, orange feet sooty and grimy, he strutted along the windowsill burring angrily, demanding to be released.

But that's another story.

Supply and demand

In the following breeze diesel fumes had wafted over our small convoy of boats for the whole journey from Milford Haven, so that when Skomer's volcanic slopes at last enfolded us, it was with merciful relief we heard the engines switched into silence. The green glorious sea was almost transparent, the sun hot, delicious and, unlike many another March we would see, the wind blew gently from the east. A razorbill had escorted us through Jack Sound, in pristine summer plumage - a harbinger of summer and the wondrous birds to come.

We were confidently assured the puffins would not be far behind.

Sat astride the boat amidst a mountain of furniture and necessary accoutrements for the newly built cedar-clad house, we smiled wistfully for those cynical friends who had tried to convince us our new home would be a bothy on the beach. We couldn't help but marvel at our wonderful luck in being there at all.

Of course, there had been a snag.

But, determined not to miss this chance of the most coveted job in the 1960 bird watching world, we crossed our fingers and declared that David was indeed a competent tractor driver - even though our only transportation until that day had been bicycles. We'd read all we could and thought we knew all there was to know. He learned - amazingly quickly - how to handle the difficulties of level pastures in Gloucestershire safely bounded by thick hedgerows, but had to swallow hard as we cruised into North Haven that March day and saw the steep slope rising from the beach. There had been no mention anywhere of hill climbing, or hairpin bends on precarious tracks edged by seventy foot cliffs.

That first morning of our island life, rolling in the gentle swell of a rising tide we soaked up the sun and our first innocent taste of celebratory Beaujolais. We were desperate to get ashore, barely able to wait for sufficient depth of water to land the dinghies high on the beach and the moment to start unloading. It would be many hours and many trips round that hairpin bend before we arrived in the kitchen, new and resplendent with manufacturers labels - only to find our huge piece of beef - then not considered any threat and coming from the best butcher in Pembroke - had been left behind.

Our disappointment was acute.

Privations, if you could call them that, of our island life were a continual concern for visitors and the absence of television or electricity caused more consternation than whether we had an abundant water supply, a refrigerator, or indeed where and how we did the "shopping". An excellent water supply we did have, yet those pervading problems and anxieties in obtaining supplies and provisions of all kinds would be our constant attendants until we left seven years later.

We'd travelled to Pembrokeshire by train a couple of weeks before with three teachests, two bicycles and a suitcase, multiplying our worldly goods with, hopefully, a month's supply of tinned and non perishable food. Accompanying us in those first

few naive days was Winnie Bowman, an American friend of the West Wales Field Society, who had been cook on Skomer in 1946 when they pioneered the island as a Field Centre. Now she provided the many furnishings for our new home, was splendid company and throughout her life remained a totally generous friend.

With much still to achieve, after our helpers had left for the bright lights of the mainland on that short March afternoon, there was time only for we three islanders to have a briefest glimpse of this magical place that had occupied our thoughts for so many months. From a vantage point on top of the island, each with our own thoughts and expectations, we gazed westward where the sun lingered reluctant to leave, low over the ocean, it's fading rays glowing through the rafters of the ruined farm. Grassholm, a small lump away on the horizon, Skokholm to the south and Ramsey to the north joined us, cliffs and faces into the light almost in homage as it disappeared.

Above the house, perched on the edge of the cliff overlooking North Haven, on the winter flattened grass bank was sited our spring - a never failing source of crystal, pure water - always cool - which fed the storage tank just below and thence the house, by gravity. So simple.

Nothing had ever tasted like it before - nor certainly since and, that first night we discovered our special water contained unthought of ingredients when Winnie decided to try the new gas heater and take a bath.

From among our precious fresh provisions, sausages - poor substitutes for our beef - were sizzling cheerfully when without warning from the quiet night, an almighty bang in the pipes seemed to shake the whole room, followed instantly by a horrendous shriek from the bathroom. Into Winnie's bathwater had plopped a dismembered frog; the sad creature must have been staring down the outlet pipe at the very moment of her bath being drawn.

Winnie never fully recovered from this intrusion and even though a filter was soon installed small swimming objects sometimes eluded the net to end their days fouling our tap washers.

David forever insisted that if our water was good enough for palmate newts it was definitely pure enough for us and, it is a fact that in all our time there we never suffered from "ill water", so perhaps there was some truth in what he said. Or could it have been the mould on bread or cheese we inadvertently consumed? It seems strange looking back from the 1990's to a time when you could survive without a refrigerator.

But Easter approached and soon Alfred, with his beautiful ex-lifeboat, The Isle of Skomer would be on station to bring the many, expected daily visitors - fresh food would be available again. It was intended he would spend the summer in a small hut near the farm and, under rules of that time if we could ensure receiving a daily item by post he could also become our official, paid postman. Our mentor and wonderful friends, Ronald and Jill Lockley decided the only sure way would be for us to order a daily newspaper - and so began our love affair with the Daily Telegraph, which continues to this day. They arrived, after bad weather sometimes seven, eight or

more at a time, alone in their lead-sealed grey canvas sacks, heavily stitched in Her Majesty's prisons.

It appeared that everyone was anxious to help.

Alfred had absolutely no need of fripperies like meat, butter or flour; for him, fresh provisions meant simple basics - onions, fruit, tomatoes. This became even more evident later that summer, after a film crew became stranded on Grassholm, six miles to the west where there is no fresh water - on a failed rescue attempt when we barely managed to hurl ashore a sack of oranges and tomatoes. Safe deliverance of the men or their sumptuously expensive equipment in tremendous groundswell was impossible but they'd hoped for beer at least, perhaps corned beef - or bread.

We'd seen our own stores float in on the tide amid many a hearty laugh to know exactly how they felt and, when they met again some days later there was almost a riot - they'd become desperate men.

Isolation can play strange tricks on the human spirit.

Our postman tired of his island existence once the holidays were over, but before leaving he willingly shared his knowledge, passing on to us many wrinkles he'd learned of the surrounding seas, especially the vagaries of the surrounding sounds and slipstreams, filling us with stupendous ideas of one day having our own boat. We could explore the caves and beaches, visit Skokholm, the mainland and Marloes, talk to Mrs John, Billy, Charlie and the people there visit West Hook farm, buy our own fresh food - bread that didn't have to be baked first - even the occasional luxury of ice cream.

Once Alfred had gone there would be no communication with the mainland - there were no helicopters nearby and, you just can't communicate with anything by setting off distress rockets - yet alone at last we revelled in our abandonment.

Every inch of this bewitching place had to be explored, bays, headlands and rocks to be named, written into the maps. Acres of heavenly scented flowers had to be lain in, insects deep in the soft heather to be discovered and listed. Above all, the birds had to be seen to be believed. We had never, in our wildest imaginings, thought to witness such beauty or elegance - thought to hear such sounds. Puffins filled our skies during the day. Manx shearwaters called and screamed from their nesting burrows in the cellar and from their natural sites around us throughout the night, slamming into our brightly lit windows in fog. And on such nights the comforting sigh of South Bishop foghorn would answer the thin reedy whistle of Skokholm as if checking on each other, ensuring all was well.

Driftwood littered the beaches in those days - salt impregnated, which would spit and sparkle, singeing rugs and furniture and, the calm following the many storms was a particularly profitable time passing ships weren't too watchful of deck cargo and many useful items floated our way in the prevailing westerly winds, ending high and dry on our beaches. Searching for and collecting this soon became something of an obsession for us; essential for keeping the house warm - though absolutely positive we generated more heat in the finding of it. Easy enough to spot but the actual

hauling up from the beaches was a task for heroes and one fifteen foot ladder proved particularly difficult, bringing us teetering almost to the brink of temporary divorce.

Much later, several storms apart but on the same beach at the foot of the Wick, on the west side of the island, a mysterious drum had appeared from nowhere. A forty gallon? Oil? Horror drugs, or, romantic fantasy - maybe brandy?

Well, it had happened before.

Through our binoculars from the rim of the Wick, surrounded by puffins puzzled at our own activities, we could discern the barrel sealed in black canvas, lying among huge boulders against the cliff base. Seal pups would be born here later in the year but now we were deadly curious and had to explore.

Impossibly heavy to carry out of the Wick in one piece, David cut into the canvas to reveal stout disc-shaped cardboard boxes, immaculately clean and dry and, tearing into the topmost one we unwrapped the most magnificent medical kit which would keep us in burn - creams and bandages for years. Amy, our pure white, one-horned goat munched her way through pounds of barley sugar over several months and the host of morphine syringes were handed to our doctor's surgery in Haverfordwest. We'd obviously stumbled upon a survival kit from a life raft, but what treasures lay in the other six boxes? The tide was rising fast - we'd have to climb out of the Wick as quickly as possible taking them unopened with us. Like the ladder it was leg aching and love-testing work, but we were islanders weren't we? Living from the sea was all part of the bargain and besides, they might contain useful tools or food supplies.

Beleagued but safely on the clifftop with the last disc, we ripped one apart to expose a standing circle of two dozen shiny, metallic- tins?

Devoid of clue-giving labels which would have helped enormously there was, fixed to the central tin like an opener on corned beef, a humble 1.5 inch nail.

We bashed and battered that nail, succeeding to bend it but utterly failing to pierce a single tin. There was nothing for it but to carry them home.

We brought the tractor as far across the fields as possible and in triumph drove our trophies down the slope to the house, past the spring bubbling merrily into the storage tank. At leisure, taste buds overflowing, we used our modern day tin opener to discover we'd slaved so hard to bring home an abundant supply of - water.

Even after all this time we speculate how shipwrecked sailors, weakened by exposure and privation could possibly have accessed those supplies of precious water - all twelve dozen of them with that nail.

In our 1997 first aid box we still have a large remnant of a giant roll of pink lint - but I can't remember for the life of me what happened to the water.

Blizzards, boats and babies

I'd vaguely persuaded myself during our first summer that if ten inch high puffins could cope with the multitudinous hazards of island brood rearing then surely we could not fail. So, like the birds, our children arrived in spring - Robert in 1961, at the end of our winter sojourn on the mainland and Rachel, rather late, on the first day of spring 1962.

Fortunately, our family doctor was also a regular Skomer visitor, seeming to relish his duty filled calls to us; even the district nurse enjoyed her drive out to Martinshaven delivering our supplies of Robert's National Orange Juice. We managed, just once, to cajole her into visiting her charge, but soon realised that allotting one whole day per child call would prove too much, even for the then unbeleagured Health Service.

As the autumn of our second season approached, our friend Ronald Lockley offered us the use of his lodge at Martinshaven, his mainland base in the 1930's when he farmed the island of Skokholm, and we were profoundly grateful for a winter home. We had our bicycles to shop in Marloes and a bus from there to the clinic - for Robert and the coming baby. Everything seemed to be working well and the same marvellous group of friends who had helped carry all our belongings to Skomer in the spring - having spread seriously into many tea-chests and boxes - helped us migrate ashore to Martinshaven.

At the on-set of winter we were assured that it never snowed, especially out on the coast. Anywhere west of Hasguard Cross was spring all winter through - they said - but at Martinshaven we experienced one of Pembrokeshire's worst winters, with snow and ice cutting us off for days. By the spring, Rachel's arrival imminent, we were well into the swing of island management and in late March a voluntary group of students would arrive to prepare for a replacement roof at the farm. David had to be there - but Rachel was late. What could she be thinking of?

With Robert safely esconced with my parents in Gloucestershire until Easter - when they would return him to us on Alfred's first boat, I waited alone. And worried.

What if the severe gales blew off our fragile roof? What if it should snow - cutting us off, again? What if our precious water pump should freeze yet again? With Rachel a week overdue I didn't give much for my chances on a bicycle - I'd given that up days ago. We did have a phone - the old style with buttons A and B - and I'd taken to sleeping with a fireman's axe under my pillow, just in case - of what, I'm not sure - planning a running route to West Hook farm should snow or gales bring down our tender telephone wires.

In the morning, of course, my situation seemed less precarious but I did decide it might just be sensible to learn what to "do" if the worst happened before David's return - the thought of being alone when my time came horrified me.

It was all very well for Amy - she knew by instinct and puffins merely laid their egg in a burrow before flying out to sea to feed.

What was I doing here alone, anyway? Why hadn't someone warned me that I could never emulate a canny goat like Amy - or would ever attain the wisdom of an ocean going seabird? A kindly baker did call twice a week.... but could I guarantee baby would arrive during one of his two minute deliveries?

I rang my doctor.

I must have been convincing over the phone, because he seemed more confident than me about the whole affair. It appeared it would be simple - like trimming Amy's crumpled horn - but my prime requisite would be to ensure I had a sterile piece of string, long enough, sealed in a jar with it's hoiled water.

To me, at that moment in time, the preparation of an unknown length of sterile string seemed one of the tasks for Hercules and one which I, was totally incapable of concocting.

He didn't leave me fretting for long - the ambulance called that afternoon - perhaps he'd only been teasing, testing my nerve. Well, I had asked.

Our resources and nerves were sorely tested the following January when Martinshaven became once more an ice-locked secret place where birds from the even colder east came, desperately seeking soft uncovered ground; bitterns, woodcock and snipe, fatally disappointed to find, even here, the ground frozen into tundra and, after their long food-deprived journeys too weak to search elsewhere. Skomer too, was frozen, with hundreds of birds killed by the cold; stonechats and wrens taking some years to return to their former numbers.

And, the snow did return. Not in mid-winter as we might have expected, but on April 14th 1966 we woke one morning to find our island six inches deep in snow, with four foot drifts in hollows and against field walls. Our spring flowers of the day before had disappeared. Budding daffodils against the banks - drifted over as if they'd never been - the promise of bluebells buried under smooth flows, while the whole island apparently paused, shrouded in strange soft silence. No gulls called from egg filled nests, no ravens joyfully tumbled the air, and oystercatchers must have huddled close their eggs way out in the centre of the island. It was as if our companions had abandoned our world without telling us, leaving only the roar of Jack Sound to fill our senses as it flowed north in full flood against the wind.

In the biting easterly wind it was certainly non-puffin weather, though only two days before large numbers had paddled contentedly in North Haven. A female mallard had, only the previous day, attempted to escort her brood of twelve ducklings across it's rough surface - heading for the doubtful safety of the mainland almost two miles away, but in it's grey broken waters she lost every single one to the piracy of a cormorant and a gang of great blackbacked gulls.

Yet this was a special day for the children - their first snow oblivious, as any five and four year old could be, of the perils to birds and flowers. There were much more important things to occupy their thoughts; a snowman to build, snow to be thrown and a sledge to be built from the myriad of driftwood collected over months of beach scouring.

We towed it behind the tractor on to the plateau of untrodden snow where the two chimneys of the distant farm - it's aged, dangerous roof timbers removed years before - stood out in stark relief. The eeriness of this mute, unfamiliar, island was uncanny, it's white fields and acres, broken only by stone wall boundaries and rock outcrops, stretching out to touch the clifftops and brooding skies; it's mysterious quietude now interrupted by our tractor's engine and children's laughter as we towed them all the way to the sheltered, child size sledging slopes close to the farm.

By 1961 we had become the custodians of a twelve foot wooden, clinker built dinghy and, overwhelmingly, all manner of new horizons beckoned as, complete with appropriate Seagull engine we intended to visit all our sea-edged neighbours.

We thrilled at silencing the outboard, to drift into secluded bays and beaches that were unseen, unknown, and rarely touched by other humans. We explored caves and inlets frequented only by seals, surveyed and numbered their pups in autumn and counted those cliff nesting birds unnoticed from above. We landed babes on offshore islets and bathed from low cliff slopes in deep discovered rock pools warmed by the summer sun.

Those kinder, trusting days of the sixties - when it didn't seem mandatory to own a car - allowed us, untroubled, to lodge our bicycles in an unlocked shed at Martinshaven. We now had the freedom to collect fresh provisions from Marloes, delight in icecreams and sliced bread, acquire Amos - a hornless billy goat kid - as a companion for Amy, from Skokholm, and easily gather spoils and driftwood from inaccessible beaches. We never ceased to be amazed at the number of beach balls and toy boats, including liners, tankers and yachts that floated in on the tide -- for our small children trophies indeed, to be towed behind our own weather inhibited craft.

In 1965 we had, with great efforts by voluntary wardens, enlarged the North Pond by extending it's earth dam, hopefully to encourage autumn waders and wintering wildfowl. Plentiful rains had filled this extended pond but our dam had serious leaks and was in danger of losing all it's stored water through erosion of the fresh banks. If only we could dump large boulders against the face - behind which we would later build a hide - packing them round with clay we might retain the rest and the winter rains would fill it again. If only we had our boat at the pond.... it was possible.....

So one August day, with the last of the summer visitors safely returned to the mainland, mounted on a larger sledge than the children's of the April snow, we towed our twelve foot dinghy from North Haven around the hairpin bend and along the same track; across three fields through deep heather and bracken to the cracked, dried mud shore of North Pond. Until the dam was complete it would remain there, providing endless fun and safe rowing on it's brown peaty waters.

Almost coincidentally we received by post, still delivered in lead-sealed canvas bags, a red inflatable canoe for the children. On South Pond - almost free of gulls and their inherent pollution - towing their plastic tankers and liners it kept us up to our ankles in water for days, while David spent his hours at the fringes with nets and specimen bottles dredging rare, exciting water beetles and insects from the encircling heather.

Skomer had always been grazed by rabbits but a severe outbreak of myxomatosis, carried by rabbit fleas, had almost annihilated their vast numbers the previous autumn and, after the snow, a springtime of seemingly endless sunshine produced swathes of flowers over ungrazed summer meadows in the central field system. No such spectacle had ever occurred in living memory - nor since - and we, with visiting botanists marvelled each day at their splendour.

Grandparents, mistakenly believing the children to be lonely, had given them a ginger kitten, Crusoe, who through his rabbit-hunting skills produced for science several rare and exciting fleas. He grew to become the last cat to live on Skomer and, like his namesake, roamed the island almost as king. With the goats he shared all our walks, sitting at the edge of cliffs and research sites in the yellow, pink and blue covered acres. Clifftops billowed with huge white daisies - sea mayweed - sea campion, thrift and we became all too easily beguiled by Skomer's benign summer beauty into believing nothing could ever go wrong, or perfection ever spoil.

Crises and northerlies

I guess our first island crisis would have been serious enough on the mainland, but for David to have severe toothache in the middle of a gale - with no boat due for days - was calamity indeed.

I don't believe we'd heard of Paracetamol in 1960 and, filling him with aspirin had no effect whatever; even my mother's antidote of loading the tooth with salt left him cold. Brown paper and vinegar which I would have lovingly placed on his cheek was angrily spurned. What to do, now all remedies had failed? I could do no more; the only cure for his present ills would be from the depths of a dentist's chair but, even if we'd had a telephone, that other unheard-of necessity, the seas were too mountainous to expect lifeboats to put to sea merely for, although excruciating, mundane toothache.

An agonising two days later rescue arrived. Aboard a Marloes lobster boat below the house in a now tranquil North Haven appeared our lifelong friends, Ronald and Jill Lockley, completely unaware that in pain we'd cried out for such deliverance. An extraction later, in Haverfordwest - outside surgery hours followed by a supremely warm, welcoming stay at their home, Orierton, we were returned safely to Skomer bearing a large box of Jill's heavenly vanilla fudge.

Strangely, we were never again troubled by toothache - aversion therapy perhaps being a marvellous cure. We were fortunate in that healthwise, even the children gave no cause for serious concern, never needing the six rockets on which we'd based our faith, for our own use. Everyone firmly believed that in any emergency during the summer months, with Alfred's Isle of Skomer at anchor, immediate assistance would be on hand.

We had all reckoned without the northerlies.

In winds blowing from any direction east to west of north our haven could become a maelstrom, totally unsafe even for Alfred. With such a wind forecast during May 1963 - Alfred gone, his boat safely tied up in Milford Haven - some local lads foolishly decided to raid the gulls nests on Midland Island, next door to Skomer - separated by Little Sound, an eighty yard miniature of the infamous Jack Sound.

Before Skomer had been declared a National Nature Reserve the richly flavoured, orange yoked eggs had forever been enjoyed as a local delicacy - leaving some only slightly compensated by our occasional deliveries to the village. We collected eggs ourselves - for baking brightly hued cakes and pancakes, as well as preserving in isinglass for hard times in autumn though I confess to never quite accepting the sight of boiled over-sized green speckled objects sitting in egg-cups. These were carefree times; who amongst us had heard of cholesterol? We were constantly urged to, "go to work on an egg," and salmonella, that unknown anxiety of the future, like the micro-chip, had yet to invade our vocabulary.

We had no idea the boys were there, believing ourselves to be the only humans west of Martinshaven - especially on such a day. One had been deposited on the Neck of Skomer - not regularly patrolled, secluded and kept as a research area free of

visitors where even more eggs were to be found. Two others had succeeded in leaping ashore on Midland Island - some achievement, on a steep sided mass with no safe landing place, but attempts to secure the boat failed. They let slip the rope, only to have it whipped from their hands and blown before the wind on furious currents southwards, through the boiling waters of Little Sound.

Moments later the gull colony on The Neck took to the air, becoming a screaming, whirling cloud of outraged prospective parenthood. Beneath them a scared, repentant boy, his unnoticing feet barely skimming the bluebelled slopes, panted towards the house. We'd seen him coming - his wild hair and flailing arms transmitting fear and expectation of rescue. His accomplices, he assured us were safe and well on Midland Island, probably frightened to death at the loss of their boat but safe on dry land, at least.

It was time to put our lifesaving and succour-bringing rockets to the test; we murmured comfortingly - help would arrive soon!

Following unwritten instructions we lit an enormous fire on the highest point to attract attention, setting fire to discarded wellingtons, old tractor tyres - anything and everything that would produce clouds of choking smoke. To hell with pollution at that time only occasionally a disturbing concept - as, through binoculars we could only blanch on seeing prospective, but disappointed, island visitors on the Deer Park at Martinshaven, pointing skywards to the spectacle exploding above the island. Colourful fireworks, bonfires? In May?

With the sun shining, blue skies, puffins and razorbills soaring what could possibly be wrong? Perhaps someone was celebrating, having wild parties.... that was some fire; but not a soul came or responded to our pleas. We felt absolutely devastated. What if the situation had been life-threatening? What if.....

It was much too rough to launch our small twelve foot dinghy we'd be swamped just getting it off the beach - we might make a bad situation worse - even tragic. We could only sit and wait for the wind to ease away later in the day. The lads would surely be missed before long and the alarm raised.

Hours later, frustrated, fire long cold and rockets expended, now desperately anxious for the boys alone on Midland Island, the wind began to drop. Northerlies do tend to die away at evening and, although at last able to launch our small boat, it was with immense relief we watched Billy and Charlie Edwards skirt Rye Rocks, buzzing into North Haven in their sturdy lobster boat. Although local coastguards they had not been informed of our smoky fire nor had they seen our six rockets bursting the sky.

A brother of the boys, on seeing their upturned boat drifting north through Jack Sound on the incoming tide and fearing the worst, had dialled 999.

If only island life could be that simple.

However, the incident, which might so easily have been tragedy, set in motion the necessity of providing us with a radio telephone, but it would not be as simple as it sounds.

Negotiations were protracted and delicate for, prior to ultrasonic radio waves, emergency wavelengths were necessarily carefully guarded and mysterious. Seaborne, sea-affected and emergency bodies being the only organisations allowed use of those special air waves, we would need a licence and training. David was immediately enlisted as an auxiliary coastguard and, with the help of St. David's lifeboat team during the winter became a fully fledged radio operator. The following spring we took delivery of a colossal filing cabinet sized ex-lighthouse radio.

Activated by two twelve volt tractor batteries which had to be constantly fully charged, the contents of the four-drawer cabinet with its humming valves and glowing bulbs remained a total mystery to us. All we knew was that every evening at eight o'clock, without fail - or it would be assumed something was wrong - we were required to telephone Skokholm lighthouse to say, " Hello! Skomer calling. All's well."

The awesome limit to this system was that, if an emergency occurred between 8.02 p.m. one night and 8 p.m. the following, we remained equally helpless. Yet, it did give us reassurance, mistakenly confident that men in fishing boats, tankers and lighthouses spent their days twiddling similar large numbered dials - quickly discerning amongst the squeaks and whistles of our working frequency if anyone out there really was in trouble.

It didn't quite turn out like that, though, as one day when we spotted a yacht drifting towards rocks near Gateholm - and the time we desperately tried to report the finding of a man's body on one of our beaches.

Billy and Charlie came out that day too.

They were experts in their craft, bounding with marvellous tales and a friendly sight around the island through the summer - in the early days accompanied by their father - usually wearing their caps to ward off the burning sun and, often with a herring gull - waiting for scraps - as figurehead on the prow. A hard existence; appearing all but foolhardy in later years when up against plundering, rubber-clad divers who submerged unabated, to pluck as many lobsters, crabs and sea-urchins from the sea floor as they could carry.

They've both gone now. Billy and Charlie long ago - and lobster-taking divers excluded by the Wildlife and Countryside Act from what is now the finest Marine Nature Reserve in the British Isles.

Sadly, not all sea-going men were expert seamen. One glorious calm August day a hired boat from Solva, complete with two enormous outboard engines, howled across St. Brides Bay into North Haven, failing to stop on hitting the beach and carrying on further up the pebbles, expensive motors blazing. Non-plussed, his boat's steering and handling in a total mess, the man later proceeded to Solva in his only remaining gear - reverse - hugging the coastline all the way. We watched him for miles, until his small white dot disappeared, conjecturing what possible explanation he might find for the poor boat owner. He would have ample time to think of one.

He was fortunate the northerlies didn't blow up that day or he may have told a different story. We'd been caught out ourselves by those treacherous winds, for shopping trips by bicycle to Marloes were no speedy affair and, in the time we were away all manner of things might happen.

We often motored into Renny Slip, a small cove south of the Deer Park at Martinshaven, where I and the children would have a happy day on warm sheltered sands, watching our boat but completely oblivious to sea conditions on the north side. Many a box of provisions and cylinders of gas have been carried up, and down, that faint track to the boulders at the cliff base, a paradise, a sun trap tucked away from view. Today, the only safe way in or out is by sea, the track long eroded away and now dangerous with loose soil and land slips.

Alfred hated taking the Isle of Skomer in here - a dangerous, fool's place, with razor edged rocks and reefs - where the wind could change from a whisper into rage at a moment's notice and a heaving groundswell appear from nowhere. Sufficient wind and sea could scour the entire sand from it's beach in a single storm, rendering the cove unrecognisable - tossing it back as carelessly as it had been removed.

Returning home one afternoon, we rounded Midland Island into Little Sound, using the northward flowing incoming tide to aid our low powered engine push us back to the north side. All seemed well at first in the eddying currents but we rapidly met the overfalls of tide versus wind, instantly deciding to turn instead for the safety of South Haven. Before we could think or find a smooth patch to steer out of the waves, at our side erupted a dolphin, not once but three times; grey, as long as the boat, fully stretched parallel to the sea, looking aside at us as, in mid flight he shook the droplets from his glistening body before finally plunging out of sight. He was gone and we were safely out of the threatening waves, wallowing in slack water left in their wake. The image of him is with us still, unforgettable.

We would meet those same waves many times, but only once more would we come within a body's breadth of such a graceful, elusive animal. Gazing from my kitchen sink I did once mistake a killer whale's fin for a small yacht as it cruised the entrance of North Haven, only to see him slide under the waves at the sound of the Isle of Skomer, laden with day visitors heading towards us.

We would have more crises - food shortage in rough autumns when we would dig for missed potatoes in our ploughed patch of the large farm garden; engine failure within yards of safety, having to row furiously against current and wind to reach shelter. We regularly mislaid day visitors who steadfastly refused to return to the boat until it was too late, necessitating an overnight stay with us - and boys would sometimes hide in the deep heather and bracken from their parents' calling, to avoid returning home.

As the shadow of another crisis, Cuba, loomed ominously across the world we momentarily contemplated our chances of survival from nuclear holocaust in the Seal Hole, a deep cathedral-like cave, where grey seals gave birth to their glossy white pups in autumn and winter and with high ledges out of the sea's reach. We dismissed this fanciful notion almost at once - but not quite forcing us to question that perhaps isolation had begun to take it's toll of our senses after all.

Time and tide

Many would say our previous life in Gloucestershire had ill prepared us for island life and, to be truthful, actually cutting ourselves off from human company had not entered into our calculations before March 1960. We were well aware of the effect loneliness had upon island dwellers - and Skomer was no exception - but to us, our new found isolation became an essential ingredient of it's total fascination, loneliness never entering the equation. Our small band of voluntary wardens and assistants were an innovation yet to be dreamed of, so apart from Alfred, family or friends, overnight visitors during our early years were quite rare. Even at the height of summer, more often than not we found ourselves the sole occupants of Skomer for days at a time, when Alfred, in sudden fancy or whisper of bad weather would wink into the wind and depart for Milford Haven.

To us, without the daily boat, actual time on Skomer meant little; very much as life must have been before the advent of clocks and a widespread desire to know the "right" time. Daylight though, was important, with each and every day insufficiently long to achieve all we set out to do; so why not have our own, "extra British summer time", by setting our clocks another hour ahead of Britain? This scheme worked splendidly, provided we remembered that shipping forecasts were at wretchedly inconvenient times and until we eventually accepted that, like earlier man, keeping "time" was irrelevant. Our day started at dawn and finished at sunset, regardless of what the clock's face told us.

In full summer, as the last visitors were waved away at four o'clock or thereabouts, for us the best of the day lay ahead, with the island settled and quiet flooded by a further six hours of daylight.

Ignoring all dictates of time, as the sun's rays dwindled from the waters of North Haven, thousands of puffins that had blissfully spent their day bobbing in the waves, diving, swimming and fishing suddenly decided there was no place in the world they would rather be, than ashore. They would swarm around the cliffs in circling clouds before landing outside their appointed nesting burrows, almost as one and the business of being neighbourly could begin in earnest.

Burrows never-endingly required tidying and clearing of debris; couples next door had to be watched and argued over and inquisitive males from across the way blustered away from freshly courted wives. Adding to their comforts underground, bluebell stems and bracken stalks, even wood shavings blown by the wind from the workshop would be dragged from nearby slopes; jackdaw feathers, dropped bedding collected by neighbours - anything that could be carried - was gathered with pride and, should boredom set in a fight could always be arranged with some unsuspecting passer by.

The whole of humanity was there to watch, outside our windows in the unworldly form of the puffin.

Built in 1959, the warden's house had been erected on the cliffs above North Haven as a suitable vantage point for overseeing the daily landing of visitors and,

fortunately, at least for us, it was also situated on the periphery of one of Skomer's largest puffin and Manx shearwater colonies.

At Ronald Lockley's instigation a series of entrance holes had been conveniently left at intervals along the base of the cellar walls and inside, with hope and anticipation of occupants, we constructed a series of wooden tunnels and nest boxes. Amazingly for two seasons, a pair of puffins laid their single white egg in one box, but we regret our noisy feet above their ceiling must have caused distress for, frustratingly, the egg was abandoned each time.

Manx shearwaters had no such scruples and up to six nest-boxes were constantly occupied, with chicks safely reared and fledged every season. Nocturnal birds, only coming ashore to their burrows and young during the safety of darkness, their strange greeting calls and gurglings were our constant night companions. Each spring, on their return from a winter spent in south Atlantic waters off the coast of Uruguay and Brazil, the thrill of seeing old friends safely home again was supremely satisfying. Our children thought nothing unusual in hearing their screams issuing from beneath the floorboards, or having puffins fall inadvertently down our chimney to land amongst their toys.

The bungalow's cedar-tiled roof had been enthusiastically utilised by up to several dozen puffins as a superb viewpoint. It's convenient slope, with wide aspects in every direction, provided instantaneous lift-off for immediate escape to the sea and safety should a passing great black backed gull venture too close. Their deep burring calls and remarkably loud footsteps as they strode and slipped on the shingles were one of the joys of summer evenings. Five dozen dismayed puffins whirring down the tiles, frequently in false alarm, gave a very good impression of a stampede, and we were convinced they often stampeded just for the sheer thrill of the chase.

Placed conveniently at the hub of all this activity was our discreet chimney, no doubt impressing many a young adult puffin with it's delightful possibilities as an extremely desirable burrow; and what better way of spending an idle moment than to investigate for future use? Though, once inside it must have seemed like the descent into hell, bouncing him amongst the black soot lining it's walls, before tipping him out into the presence of humans with their fiendish flashing cameras.

Once, on a bitter May afternoon with a westerly wind lashing squally showers against the house, the children and I were snug by our fireside when scrapings and rumblings from the chimney depths heralded a furious, singeing puffin. He shot out of the smoke and flames as if pursued by the devil himself, to flutter and fight with the white walls of the room, leaving strange black wing marks patterning the walls. Ruffled feathers still smoking but completely unafraid, he strutted along the windowsill on huge poppy coloured feet, grumbling through the glass to his compatriots outside. With his large red bill twisting one's flesh with the strength of pliers, his talloned feet, sharp as any fishing hooks, he pugnaciously defied our attempts to release him.

The ebb and flow of the tides, unregulated by any clock, perhaps were our ultimate timekeepers. The tide race flowing north into St. Brides Bay influenced our timing for shopping - it would be impossible to cross to, or from, the mainland at the top of the

tide as well as telling us, in conjunction with the wind, whether it was safe, or time, to go exploring or driftwood gathering in the inlets, beaches and caves. They also indicated to us, and others, the right time to go fishing. As if at a signal, the island birds would gather from every direction to swirl in the eddies edging the tide race, plunging and diving for fish. Kittiwakes, shags, cormorants, gannets and gulls, accompanied by the occasional rising group of porpoises, would follow the incoming tide.

Kenny Edwards, long time friend and for some years using a small boat to fish out of Martinshaven, introduced us to our first luscious taste of freshly captured mackerel, explaining all - throw a hook attached to a piece of string over the side, or from rocks, and the fleeting mackerel would leap at the chance of being caught.

Alas, it just was not that simple. For us, fishing did not come easy. We lost far more hooks and line than any fish we might have caught. Pollack were about the only fish slow enough for us to take home in triumph, catching so many one evening that our small son turned against eating fish for ever. We decided to leave it to the experts.

Billy and Charlie were experienced lobster fishermen, alongside their father and many other Marloes men before them, but in spite of countless mouthwatering recipes given, after committing my first ever live lobster to a boiling watery grave I returned happily to Spam and corned beef, agreeing with Robert to leave fish to the deep - and the birds.

One unlikely fish we did enjoy - though heavily disguised as delectable fish cakes - was conger eel. Hanging from a nail for skinning, which was unbelievably difficult, it could have been a giant cod, other than the repulsive pink worms creeping under it's skin. I spent more time looking for these with microscopic care than it would have taken me to walk to Haverfordwest for a more acceptable alternative. I hasten to add the eels, viscious creatures trapped while foraging for bait left in lobster pots were not caught or, heaven forbid, retrieved by us from the narrow neck of a wicker pot, but given to us by French fishermen who occasionally came to Skomer for shelter.

Before the twelve mile fishing exclusion, these high prowed, wooden vessels from Camaret in Brittany would frequently set their pots far out on the reefs around Grassholm, the Hats and Barrels and The Smalls. They would infuriate Billy and Charlie whenever they set close round Skomer, for they knew, as we did, that the Frenchmen were never averse to a bit of poaching from their lines when an opportunity arose.

In calm weather the sound of their leisurely, loose-throated engines thumped their approach under the cliffs long before they appeared, but the very first night they called, we couldn't guess at what had arrived. Disembodied, with no hint of their elegant brightly painted boats their mast lights twinkled into the night, loud foreign voices drifting over an unruffled sea. To the children, used as they were only to sounds of wind, the ocean and bewitched bird calls in the total darkness beyond their window, the Frenchmen's occasional visits brought a lasting impression of an unrealised outside world. On our first night ashore following our final departure from Skomer years later, six years old Robert, forgetting in the blackness that he was a

long way from the sea and North Haven, believed Marloes' many street lights to be a myriad flickering French mastheads.

Before we knew them well we came to enjoy hearing their anchor chains slithering through transoms, acknowledging waves of cheery recognition. Yet, in futile attempts to vary their unending ship's diet of fish, the occasional crew created bedlam by shooting at birds on cliff ledges. David dissuaded their ghastly game by providing them with an eagerly accepted alternative - fresh rabbits. Their weathered, unshaved faces transformed, as with whetted appetites they dragged the boy cook, draped in bloodied apron, from his fish stew to demonstrate their preparation. From that day we shared many bottles of raw red wine and their preferred, undrinkable pernod hunched round a table under swinging lamps in their minute cabin: or squinting into the sun between ropes and lobster pots talking in handwaving-school-remembered French on a heaving, creaking deck.

Albert, once in the French Resistance and skipper- owner of the Marie Claire was wisely, extremely wary of bringing his beautiful vessel through the currents and reputation of Jack Sound. So one glorious July evening, with the wind forecast as backing round to the south before morning, Albert gave David the dubious privilege - with her slow to respond, chain driven steering - of piloting Marie Claire safely from South to North Haven through the vagaries of Jack Sound. An enthralling though anxious - experience, leaving our wobbly wake behind us all the way.

Much later, bottles of French perfume filling my pockets, a gusting wind already flicking the haven into sharp waves, the black night filled with cries of returning shearwaters we rowed home in the tipsy darkness, full to our gunwhales with baskets of live edible crabs - a portion of their precious cargo. Albert had been grateful beyond need, deaf to all protestations so that - perhaps ungraciously, but appalled at the thought of cooking, let alone eating, almost a hundred crabs - before hauling our boat out of reach of the waves, every one was returned to the sea.

We hoped Billy and Charlie - or Kenny - would find them next time around.

All things considered

I don't think we fully appreciated exactly how paradisaical others looked upon our life on Skomer and, from a distance of almost forty years it's quite strange recalling what were, then, normal everyday occurrences. "Life" pushes paradise into the background and takes control.

My husband worked - very hard - seven days a week - this was no nine to five post and we fully accepted his extension of work long into the evenings. This was the "norm" - we expected nothing different; yet another aspect of his fascinating job. In 1960 his salary was £30 per month, which just about covered our provisions, Calor gas and petrol for the boat, but I know, if we'd been able, we would have cheerfully paid just to be there.

It's funny how, and why, we concerned ourselves over simple things when really serious matters such as health, water supplies, stores - or lack of them - isolation, even danger, were all taken in our stride.

Cut off by bad weather many times, meals necessarily had to be manufactured from miraculous, unallied ingredients but a shopping expedition to Mrs John's post office in Marloes guaranteed a gourmet's holiday - for a few days at least - fresh sausages and bacon providing instantaneous meals, with absolutely no imagination necessary. Without a 'fridge butter soon became pretty disgusting - whoever had heard of polyunsaturates then? Bacon was edible only for a matter of days, even less in summer, when cheese and bread rapidly developed a fine green growth. Removing an outer layer totally failed to prevent it's intrusion for long, succeeding in manifesting itself deep at the heart of the largest portion. Packets of dehydrated peas and potato were just appearing on shop shelves - sliced bread was the wonder of the age.

Alongside the discovery of wondrous appetites, encouraged by all that sea air, home baked bread took on a whole new meaning for me; taking forever to produce, and developing the extraordinary ability to consume tons of it while fresh - finding it inedible by the following day. If I wasn't careful, preparing it could have become my life's work.

Amy had steadfastly refused to allow milking, for which I was forever grateful, and our taste buds had quickly become accustomed to the rich creamy taste of Carnation tinned milk. Now never included in my shopping trolley, from this distance in time it's memory- engrained, almost ice-cream-like flavour transports me back to days of autumn winds with rain closing around us, logs spitting fire into rooms lit by gas lamps hissing long into the night.

With fanciful visions of show-quality vegetables we painstakingly replanted the old walled garden at the farm and, discovering an abandoned plough in one of the barns, with David pushing, we towed it's squeaking power behind the tractor for potato drills. The rabbits in the fields around had seen it all before of course, and must have laughed themselves silly all the way under our wire fence, preparing their tastebuds yet again for that golden moment of harvest - for every twenty lettuce grown we probably had one - and our carrots.... well.....

Skomer's one and only tree also grew here at the farm. A black poplar survived within a corner of the large yard, any new growth nipped off by salt winds, levelling its topmost branches to the height of the protecting walls. However, its sideways growth flourished and at its peak was a handsome specimen; long, low branches providing a splendid swing for Robert and Rachel and its luxuriant foliage a safe haven for migrant birds after unbelievable journeys. While our garden failed to be so very profitable for us it actually became a marvellous stopover for them and, using the boundary walls for cover we were able to creep up on, and enjoy the spectacle of unsuspecting passage birds resting, exhausted, on the seed heads of our leeks and half nibbled lettuce.

Inside the lesser barns, sheets of corrugated iron roofs lay rusting where they had fallen after the collapse of rotting timbers. But these were not "tidied away" for, decaying amongst brambles, elder bushes and stinging nettles, their man made tunnels were home to elegant slowworms, beetles and fungii, sleeping toads and of course, the unique Skomer vole. This marvellously tame mammal is a delight to find; so unafraid, its handsome russet coat, large size, and unmouse like behaviour setting it well apart. Humans, surprisingly, hold no terrors for this small creature who will sit in the palm of your hand disarmingly completing his toilette, washing and preening his thick coat as if hidden, safe, totally unconcerned even when placed in the children's wavering fingers.

I possessed one dress - bought in the relief of regaining some semblance of shape after Robert's birth and for some reason had it with me on the island. Why, I've long forgotten - but when Woman magazine called one day they explained their readers would expect me to wear a dress for the "photograph". Like an obedient child I did as instructed, though I know I should have resisted, for I'm positive their readers perceived me to have been quite peculiar - in a dress and teetering high heeled shoes? On an island?

We had quite a few "photographs" taken at various times, usually in the spring when we returned to Skomer for the new season, with our annually increasing pile of belongings. They even made a film, including "shopping" in Haverfordwest - an unattainable treat in summer - but ultimately it was the childrens "loneliness" that raised most concern and interest.

I don't believe for an instant that they were truly lonely, for our days were action packed - with walks, boat trips, rambles over heather slopes, bathing and beachcombing. By re-damming, the Iron Age pools in the Wick stream magically transformed into perfect miniature oceans to sail their plastic liners and tankers. Kittiwakes would swoop, undaunted by our presence, for beakfuls of mud from their edges to cement precarious nests to niches on the sheer face of the Wick. I also had the supreme advantage of being unable to "go to work" - even if I had wanted to - so that every single day was spent together.

We thought they were quite shy and we did worry that when eventually they met other children life might prove more complicated than they'd come to expect. So, with the children growing we spent our short winters in Marloes, eventually buying for £750 a tiny cottage, situated off the village square. We'd been told that Tom, a gamekeeper from St.Bride's castle, once lived there so what more appropriate name for our new

home than "Tom the Keepers"? Living here, within the village gave Robert and Rachel a marvellous opportunity to meet and play with other children, go to parties, pantomimes, even Sunday school. But the years were passing - all too quickly - and day school beckoned. Could anything be done to delay our final departure?

With no guarantee the weather, or Alfred, would allow them ashore every morning or, worse, bring them safely home each night and no transport to the village school it was extremely likely that school would spell an end to our island existence.

Enquiries at the Education Department soon uncovered that, provided we could spell, read and write ourselves they would supply us with all necessary books and other aids, enabling us to stay until Robert was seven.

We considered long and hard. They'd had such a carefree young life, with no discipline of time or group involvement - and what danger did traffic mean to them? They'd never needed the essentials of road safety. Give them a cliff slope and they were nimble as any nanny goat, but crossing the road still held untold terrors for Rachel. Inevitably, we decided that by the time they were seven, and six, our choice of isolation would be expecting too much of them.

You see what I mean by worrying about the simple things?

Because, of course, they had no difficulty settling into village life at all. Friends made during past winters were with them all the way and no one would have guessed they'd ever lived anywhere else. We'd made wonderful friends too, but what of us? Would we be equally able or willing to adjust?

So in October 1966 we took our leave. I can't remember the last thing we did, other than the tremendous rush to get everything packed in time for the boat. An absolute mountain of belongings needed strong, good friends - and we had them that day our neighbour, George Thomas, transporting our worldly goods to Tom The Keepers in his large black lorry; a far cry from two bicycles, three tea-chests and a suitcase.

Catherine, who was born just too late to share that special part of our life became an island volunteer after A-levels while waiting to enter the WRNS. Between her nursing training Rachel, with Catherine, as two kittiwakes against the Wick, helped cement render the barn; Robert, in between exams, spent several idyllic summers as a voluntary warden. One horrific autumn day we nearly lost him when he fell into Little Sound from rocks above the Lantern, a cave with three majestic entrances, north, east and south at the extreme easterly end of the island. He'd been counting seals. Perhaps the gods - or maybe another dolphin - had been passing. He was very lucky.

Amy and Amos had gone by then, buried with her supply of toffees, cigarette ends and barley sugar - specially purchased, as her stock from the liferaft had been consumed long ago.

We humans must be the most adaptable of earth's creatures.

Perhaps we've evolved just to be so, for afterwards we were able to bear the thought of new wardens roaming loved cliffs and meadows. Happy to relish their marvelling at

the same heavenly flowers, their exploration of all those familiar caves, rocks and inlets we'd named.

Amy's Reach, where Amy followed us down a seventy foot slope to the beach to wander among young seals; Robert's Wick, one of our first adventures by boat, with Robert in his carry-cot; The Amos, oh, so closely resembling that sprawling heap of loving odour, and The Rachel, a tiny offshore rock parting the swirling tide where we'd landed two laughing children.

It was as if we had never been.