

= Steep Holm =

Steep Holm (Welsh : Ynys Rhonech , Old English : Ronech and later Steopanreolice) is an English island lying in the Bristol Channel . The island covers 48 @.@ 87 acres (19 @.@ 78 ha) at high tide , expanding to 63 @.@ 26 acres (25 @.@ 60 ha) at mean low water . At its highest point it is 78 metres (256 ft) above mean sea level . It lies within the historic boundaries of Somerset and administratively forms part of North Somerset . Between 1 April 1974 and 1 April 1996 it was administered as part of Avon . Nearby is Flat Holm island (Welsh : Ynys Echni) , part of Wales .

The Carboniferous Limestone island rises to about 200 feet (61 m) and serves as a wind and wave break , sheltering the upper reaches of the Bristol Channel . The island is now uninhabited , with the exception of the wardens . It is protected as a nature reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) with a large bird population and plants including wild peonies . There was a signal station or watchtower on the island in Roman times , but there may have been human habitation as early as the Iron Age . In the 6th century it was home to St Gildas and to a small Augustinian priory in the 12th and 13th centuries . An inn was built in 1832 and used for holidays in the 19th century . A bird sanctuary was established in 1931 and since 1951 has been leased to charitable trusts . It is now owned by the Kenneth Allsop Memorial Trust .

In the 1860s the island was fortified with ten 7 @-@ inch rifled muzzle loaders as one of the Palmerston Forts for the coastal defence of the Bristol Channel until it was abandoned in 1898 . The infrastructure was reused in World War I and II when Mark VII 6 @-@ inch breech @-@ loading guns and search lights were installed . To enable the movement of materials , soldiers from the Indian Army Service Corps initially used mules and then installed a cable @-@ operated winched switchback railway .

= = Geology and ecology = =

The island is formed of Carboniferous Limestone and is often described as geologically a continuation of the Mendip Hills at Brean Down ; however , the dip is at a different angle to that on Brean Down . On Steep Holm the dip is about 30 degrees to the north whereas at Brean Down it is 30 degrees to the south . There are some folds and fractures with dip angles up to 75 degrees created during the final phases of the Variscan orogeny near the end of the Carboniferous Period , 300 million years ago .

The island rises to about 200 feet (61 m) from the surrounding sea and covers 49 acres (20 ha) at high tide , whereas at low tide it expands to 63 acres (25 ha) due to the tidal range of 43 feet (13 m) , second only to the Bay of Fundy in Eastern Canada . There are many caves on the island , and pot holes up to 60 metres (200 ft) deep in the surrounding sea bed that are believed to be the remnants of collapsed cave systems . The caves on the islands cliffs are at two different levels : the caves in the current inter @-@ tidal zone which are below the water table and are producing stalactites , and many others high up on the cliffs that were on the water line many thousands of years ago .

Steep Holm is protected as a nature reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) , notification having taken place in 1952 . There is a large bird population , particularly European herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and Lesser black @-@ backed gulls (*Larus fuscus*) . There has also been a small population of muntjac deer . The plateau at the top of the island has a layer of soil between 6 inches (150 mm) and 12 inches (300 mm) deep . It has a red colour from veins of iron in the rock and has arrived as sand particles less than 0 @.@ 0039 inches (0 @.@ 099 mm) in diameter . The island is the only site in the UK on which wild peonies (*Paeonia mascula*) grow , although these have been damaged by the fungus botrytis . The wild peony was introduced to the island of Steep Holm , possibly by monks , or brought from the Mediterranean by the Romans . Alexanders (*Smyrniolum olusatrum*) are also common along with golden samphire , buck 's @-@ horn plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) and wild leeks (*Allium ampeloprasum*) . The only reptiles on the island are slow worms (*Anguis fragilis*) .

= = History = =

= = = Prehistoric to Roman = = =

The earliest sign of human activity on the island are prehistoric vertebrae of red deer discovered in Five Johns ' Cave during an exploration in 1975 . Worked flints from the Mesolithic and scrapers from the Neolithic were uncovered as part of the Priory excavations carried out between 1977 and 1992 .

Roman remains , possibly a signal station or watchtower , have been identified on the island by an electrical resistance survey . Accurate exploration and interpretation of the site is difficult as it was reused by builders in both the Victorian era and during World War II . A carved stone head found on the island in 1991 is likely to be a Celtic head from the Romano @-@ British era , but may be from the Iron Age . In addition to shards of cooking pots from the Roman era , some luxury items have been identified including Arretine ware , La Tène style broaches , and an amphora dating from between 90 and 140 AD which was made in southern Spain . There have also been shards of Castor ware . Fragments of pottery roofing and box flue tiles have been identified signifying the presence of a heating system and possibly a bath house . Roman coins from the reigns of Claudius Gothicus (268 ? 270) and Tetricus I (271 ? 273) have also been found .

= = = Religious foundations = = =

According to legend , first recorded by John Leland in the 16th century , Saint Gildas , the author of *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* , lived on Steep Holm during the 6th century . He arrived on Steep Holm after visiting his friend Saint Cadoc , who lived on Flat Holm as a hermit . Gildas supposedly left the island , after pirates from the Orkneys carried off his servant and furniture , to become Abbot of Glastonbury . The Vikings took refuge on Steep Holm during the summer of 914 and then carried out raids on the coast of Somerset at Watchet and Porlock , according to the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle . At the end of the 12th century , there was a small priory of Canons Regular of St Michael on the island . The only priory building fully excavated measured 73 feet (22 m) long and 15 feet (4 @. @ 6 m) wide , with the cloisters and other structures still to be identified . The date of the original foundation of the priory is unclear ; however , in the early 13th century the patron was William I de Cantilupe . His family were also patrons of Studley Priory in Warwickshire . His grand @-@ daughter married Lord Robert de Tregoz who acquired the freehold of the whole island ; however , endowments for the upkeep of the priory were declining , which led to it being abandoned between 1260 and 1265 , the monks returning to Studley Priory . A Blue Lias memorial stone from the abbey , which has a Cross of Lorraine , was found in 1867 during the fortification of the island . It was incorporated into an armoury leading to the naming of the " tombstone battery " .

= = = Manorial ownership = = =

The island seems to have been held , in association with the local manors of Uphill and Christon , by the Bek family , who granted it to Henry de Lacy , 3rd Earl of Lincoln . Although the mechanism is unclear , it next passed to the Berkeley family with Maurice de Berkeley , the second Baron Berkeley , holding it in 1315 . The site was used again by warreners in the 14th and 15th centuries . They lived in one of the ruined priory buildings which was rebuilt . By 1453 the overlordship of the island was held by James Butler , 4th Earl of Ormond , and in 1460 the advowson was exercised by Margaret Talbot , Countess of Shrewsbury . In the years following , the ownership of a variety of estates , including Norton Beauchamp , to which Steep Holm was attached , was disputed . In the 16th century Edward Seymour , 1st Duke of Somerset took over , and then lost , large estates including Brean , to which Steep Holm was allied . The Seymour descendants recovered the estates , owning them into the 17th century , although the only activity on Steep Holm seems to have been the employment of gull watchers and fishermen . In 1684 the Norton Beauchamp estate was sold to

Edward Ryder . It appears to have been auctioned by decree of the Court of Chancery 11 years later in 1695 , possibly because of difficulties in maintaining sea defenses along the Somerset coast ; however , this seems to have been disputed in the light of outstanding mortgages . In 1699 the estates , including Steep Holm , were sold to Philip Freke of Bristol , whose descendants held it for the next 130 years . Freke 's granddaughter married into the family of John Willes , who was Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and Member of Parliament . During their ownership , probably around 1776 , a new cottage was built on Steep Holm for fishermen . It was built using stones from the ruined priory . In 1830 the island was sold again , according to some sources this was to a cousin of John Freke Willes named William Willes ; however , other sources suggest it was to a solicitor in Weston @-@ super @-@ Mare named John Baker .

In 1832 the island was leased to Colonel Tynte of Halswell House , who established an inn for sailors . The inn was run by the Harris family , using rum and tobacco bought from ships . They claimed that the island was outside the jurisdiction of the excise men until a court case in 1884 . After the Harris family , the inn was run by Mr W. L. Davies , who offered fishing , shooting and boating holidays . To make landing on the island easier , a new pier was built close to the inn . In 1835 clergyman John Ashley from Clevedon voluntarily ministered to the population of the island and the neighbouring Flat Holm . Ashley created the Bristol Channel Mission in order to serve seafarers on the 400 sailing vessels which used the Bristol Channel . The mission would later become the Mission to Seafarers , which still provides ministerial services to sailors in over 300 ports .

= = = Palmerston Fort = = =

Both Steep Holm and Flat Holm were fortified in the 1860s as a defence against invasion . They form part of a line of defences , known as Palmerston Forts , built across the channel to protect the approaches to Bristol and Cardiff . The island was fortified following a visit by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to France , where they had been concerned at the strength of the French Navy . The Royal Commission on the Defence of the United Kingdom , under the direction of Lord Palmerston , recommended fortification of the coast , and the island formed part of this strategic coastal defence system . Construction began in 1865 and was completed in 1869 by John Perry of Weston @-@ super @-@ Mare . The work involved the creation of a perimeter road around the summit plateau and a lime kiln for the manufacture of lime mortar to build the barracks and gun emplacements with their ammunition stores .

The concrete gun emplacements were called Summit Battery , Laboratory Battery , Garden Battery and Tombstone Battery . Along with the barracks they have been designated as Grade II listed buildings . The facilities installed included a master @-@ gunners house , a small inn , and a water tank holding 49 @,@ 000 imperial gallons (220 @,@ 000 l ; 59 @,@ 000 US gal) of rainwater . The water tank is beneath the barracks and collects rainwater from its roof . The brick tank is 16 @.@ 7 metres (55 ft) long , 4 @.@ 8 metres (16 ft) wide and 4 @.@ 5 metres (15 ft) high with a vaulted roof . Armaments included ten 7 @-@ inch rifled muzzle loaders Mk III spread between six batteries . These were later replaced with Armstrong 6 @-@ inch RML guns . Some of the gun batteries are scheduled monuments , and there are the remains of a centralised group of brick @-@ built barrack blocks . In 1898 test firing by HMS Arrogant , an Arrogant @-@ class cruiser , on Rudder Rock battery showed that the fixed gun emplacements used on Steep Holm and other sites were susceptible to attack by modern warships , and the site was no longer active . The military control on the island was maintained until 1908 when it was leased to James Sleeman and his family . In 1927 the first test of the RAE Larynx (from " Long Range Gun with Lynx engine ") an early pilotless aircraft , to be used as a guided anti @-@ ship weapon , took place just off Steep Holm .

= = = World wars = = =

These facilities were updated in both World War I and World War II . From 1915 to 1919 the island

was requisitioned by the Admiralty as a coastguard station . After the war the Sleemans returned to carry out farming and fishing and played host to occasional tourists . In World War II , search light batteries were built on Steep Holm . In 1940 the island 's warden , Harry Cox , who had developed the island into a bird sanctuary since 1931 , was appointed as a coastguard and was supported by Local Defence Volunteers from Weston @-@ super @-@ Mare . In 1940 and 1941 the battery was refortified by soldiers from the Indian Army Service Corps using mules to transport guns and equipment up the steep cliffs . The armament included Mark VII 6 @-@ inch breech @-@ loading guns taken from World War I naval vessels which had been scrapped , and also included Lewis automatic machine guns against air attack . The Garden Battery was built over two Victorian stone gun emplacements . Engineers from the Royal Pioneer Corps improved the infrastructure including importing sheep to feed the soldiers and , after a case of typhoid fever , shipping drinking water from south Wales . To enable the movement of equipment , the engineers built a new jetty . This was linked to the plateau with a cable @-@ operated winched switchback railway using prefabricated 60 centimetres (24 in) gauge lines which had been captured from the Germans in World War I. The Steep Holm batteries were also connected , by underwater telegraph cable , to the Brean Down Fort batteries , but parts of the cable were stolen for scrap after the end of World War II .

= = = Post war = = =

In 1953 the island was leased by the Steep Holm Trust supported by four local organisations : the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society , Bristol Naturalists Society , Mid @-@ Somerset Naturalists and the Bristol Folk House Archaeological Club . They repaired some of the buildings and established a bird ringing programme . In 1974 their lease expired and was taken over by the Kenneth Allsop Memorial Trust , a charity formed in memory of the broadcaster and naturalist Kenneth Allsop . The Trust purchased the island in 1976 . The mission statement of the Trust is : " To protect , preserve and enhance for the benefit of the public the landscape , antiquities , flora , fauna , natural beauty and scientific interest of the island of Steep Holm in the County of North Somerset and to advance the education of the public in the natural sciences . "

Visits can be made to the island . The trust runs day @-@ long boat trips from Weston @-@ super @-@ Mare . One barrack block is in use to provide visitor facilities . In 1980 the Bollywood film Shaan was set and partially filmed on the island .