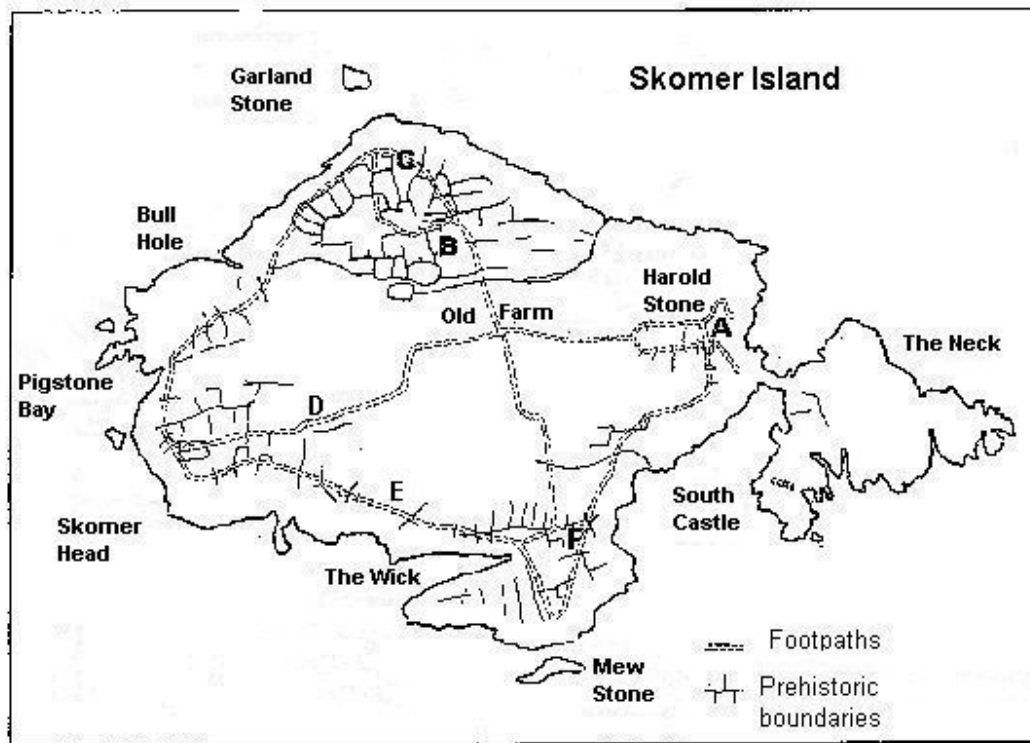


Skomer Island History Factsheet

The history of Skomer is inevitably linked to that of the nearby mainland, but clearly the Island has a special and unique history to tell. Although there have been a number of academic studies on the Island's past (see Further Information for more details), there has never been a major archaeological dig on the Island and therefore much of what we know is from field observation and comparison to other sites. It is hoped that a new desk study and field-work planned for 2009/2010 will give more information, particularly about the Iron Age settlements, and this will greatly increase our knowledge of the Island's past.



The sketch map shows a number of key Features of Interest, which are also all referred to in the Skomer Guide. Full information is given below, and related to the Points or letters on the map. The best time of year to investigate the Island's history is in early spring or late summer/autumn. It is at these times that the vegetation, particularly the bracken, has either not grown yet or has died back to enable the historic features to be seen more clearly. Looking early in the morning or late afternoon on sunny days, will enable you to see shadows cast by features in the ground that will help bring many aspects of the Island's past into focus.

What's in a name?

Skomer is sometimes called Skalmey on old maps and texts, and indeed the name of the Countryside Council for Wales' boat operated by the Marine Nature Reserve staff is Skalmey. The name Skalmey is of Viking origin, coming from two words "skalm" meaning a short sword, or cleft or cut, and "ey" meaning island, thus Skalmey or Cleft Island, probably referring to the fact that the island appears almost cut in two, joined only by the narrow strip of land known as The Isthmus, leading to The Neck, or possibly due to the deep cut sea cliff in the south of the Island, The Wick. Many islands around the Welsh coast have names that are Viking in origin ("holm" being Viking for example), reflecting the successive invasions and sorties by this seafaring people from Skandinavia, although there is no hard evidence of their presence on Skomer. The current name Skomer derives from Skalmey, its spelling and pronunciation having mutated over the years.



Skomer Island History Factsheet

Early history

On the mainland we know that there were nomadic Hunter Gatherer communities in south west Wales by about 37,000 years Before Present (BP). At that time Skomer would have been part of the mainland, it only becoming cut off as an island following the sea level rise at the end of the last Ice

Age: around 12,000BP. There is no clear evidence, bar a few flint flakes that were typical hunter gatherer's tools, that the area now known as Skomer was used by these hunter gatherers.



Iron Age round house

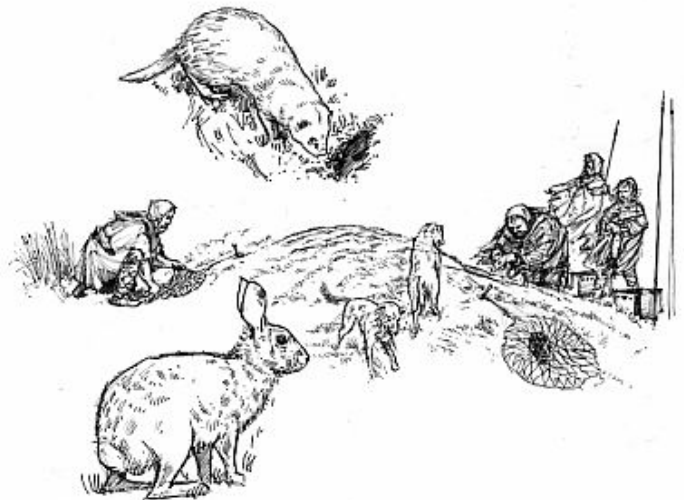
Iron Age

The main settlement of the Island can be dated to between 5000 and 2000BP, and evidence and remains from this period, known as the Iron Age, can be seen all around the Island. The remains of huts, fields and cairns (possibly burial cairns) on Skomer are some of the most complete and untouched remains

of this period in whole of Europe, and their extent indicates an Iron Age farming community of up to 200 people. The importance of the site has been recognised by most of the Island (with the exception of the area around the Old Farmhouse Complex) being designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument by Cadw, the Welsh Government Heritage Agency. On the mainland a similarly dated Iron Age settlement can be seen in the Deer Park, and there is an interpretation panel in the Martin's Haven Car Park.

Middle Ages

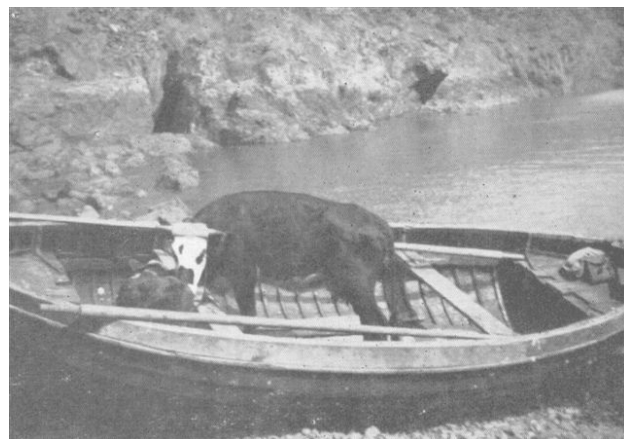
Following the Iron Age settlers there is no clear history of habitation until the Middle Ages, when in the 13th Century rabbits were introduced to the Island. Rabbits were brought to the British Isles by the Normans and were a valuable source of food and fur, their skins being as important as their meat. Many islands were used as Warrens (places where Rabbits were kept) at that time, as the Rabbits could not escape and equally they could easily be protected from poachers. From the 13th Century up until today Rabbits have been a vital part of the Island's life. Initially, they were very important to the people who lived or farmed there, with Conies (the early name for Rabbits) being a major export from the Island to local markets. They have become even more important recently as the main grazing animal on the Island, maintaining the short vegetation and plant diversity. It seems likely that the early Warreners had a simple homestead in the centre of the Island, probably where the Old Farmhouse Complex is today.



Skomer Island History Factsheet

18th Century Onwards

The Old Farmhouse ruin, seen today in the centre of the Island, dates from about 1840 but a similarly substantial house is first thought to have been built on the site around 1700. The slightly thicker soils in this part of the Island, and access to water from North Valley enabled a range of crops to be grown, and large fields were established around the farm with long straight stone wall boundaries. There are records of the farm supporting three families at one stage with cows and sheep grazing the Island, as well as horses to help with the heavy work. Cereals were grown and hay crops taken, it would have been a hive of activity at harvest time. Farming was largely



as

abandoned after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, with a slight revival in the 1930s but then all agriculture on the Island finally ended in 1950. In 1959 the Island was bought for the nation by the Nature Conservancy (the Government department that became the Countryside Council for Wales) helped by the West Wales Field Society (the charity that became the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales), and was declared one of the country's first National Nature Reserves. It has been managed as a nature reserve since then, owned by the Countryside Council for Wales and leased by the Wildlife Trust. It is one of the most important sites for breeding seabirds in the British Isles, and hosts over 40% of the world's breeding population of Manx Shearwater.

Features of Interest



Lime Kilns (Point A): There are two quite large 19th Century lime kilns on the Island: one below the Information and Welcome Point (at the top of the path from the beach at North Haven) now used as a shelter, and one above the Information and Welcome Point, below the Harold Stone (see below). Lime was important on the island both to be used as mortar for the buildings and to spread on the land as a fertilizer, the volcanic rocks of the Island not giving rise to a naturally fertile soil. Limestone (and coal) would have been imported from the mainland, landed on the beach at North Haven and then moved to the kilns where it would be heated. The intense heat changed the rock, making in brittle and easy to crush to a fine

powder ready for use.

Harold Stone (Point A): This feature is one of Skomer's mysteries. It may date from the Iron Age, it is largely unshaped by human hands, with no obvious cutting or tool marks, although the corners seem to have been smoothed, possibly by years of cattle or other animals rubbing themselves on it. As with many standing stones its function is unknown although many have speculated, and the origin of the name is also lost. Perhaps it was a marker for approaching boats to head towards, or perhaps the sign of something or someone guarding the Island – you are welcome to put forward your views!

Skomer Island History Factsheet

The Old Farm Complex:

The Old Farmhouse was once an impressive and substantial house with early pictures showing a fancy metal veranda running the length of the house. At the back, north east corner of the building is an old smoking oven where fish and meats would have been preserved. The Old Farmhouse is built in traditional Pembrokeshire vernacular style with small slates protecting the front of the house, fixed in mortar. The current farmhouse was built about 1840 and was lived in by various tenants and owners of the Island.

Lord Kensington bought the Island in 1897 and used it mainly as part of his sporting estate. Mr J J Neale, a trawler owner from Cardiff, leased the Island in 1905 with the aim of protecting the wildlife, but he had to relinquish the lease later and it was subsequently bought by a well-to-do dentist, a Mr Sturt, who did stay on the Island with his family, and whose daughter eventually married a local man Reuben Codd. The Codds then farmed the Island until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.



Farm complex in 2011



the place it once was.

Where the new Assistant Warden's and Volunteers' accommodation blocks are now (the wooden buildings along the side of the Courtyard) was once sheds (possibly housing farm workers) and pigsties. The Visitor Centre would have housed farm machinery such as the grinding and threshing machines. If you look outside the Visitor Centre, behind the buildings, there are two raised horse walks where the farm horse would have walked in circles turning wheels that would have powered this equipment. At one stage there were holes through the walls through which the crank shafts linked horse to machine. The Old Barn, now residential visitor and research accommodation, was a substantial two story barn for storage and animals.

The Island became a Field Study Centre for a year (1946), run by the West Wales Field Society, and visitors stayed in the house and were supported by the family who previously had farmed there. In 1950 the Codds finally left the Island completely, and in 1954 the roof of the Old Farmhouse was severely damaged during a major storm. Since that time the Old Farmhouse has been a ruin, but recognised as an important part of the historic landscape. The Skomer Island Heritage Project has enabled the Old Farmhouse to be made safe, and for shelters, interpretation and even a number of windows to be reinstated. This allows the building to be used by visitors once again, and gives people a feel for

Skomer Island History Factsheet

Boundary Walls, Banks and Terraces:

all around the Island are old walls, banks and terraces or lynchets. As the land is worked by farmers, both ploughing and grazing animals, the soil tends to move downhill, accumulating against banks or walls. These features give us the first indications of Iron Age and subsequent farming on Skomer. The relatively high and straight walls that are around the Old Farmhouse Complex are much more recent, but probably used the stones from the ancient walls, with the later farming activity in this area, particularly ploughing, hiding all traces of the previous ancient field systems. If you walk from the Old Farmhouse towards the Garland Stone you will follow a 19th Century wall, even using it as the footpath where it crosses North Valley Stream. At the right time of year at this point you can see ridges and furrows or shallow troughs, with heathers, bracken and brambles growing on the ridges, and grasses and marsh plants growing in the troughs. This is evidence of an old ploughing system, five-step ploughing, which enabled crops to be grown on the drier raised ground.



The old farmhouse, now a managed ruin

Iron Age Settlements: There are a number of discrete Iron Age settlements around the Island, each one slightly different.

In the north (Point B): moving out of North Valley towards the Garland Stone, looking towards North Pond, when conditions are suitable, the remains of a number of circular Iron Age huts in pairs can be seen. An information panel in the Old Farmhouse shows how a settlement might have looked. Around the huts were several small enclosures probably for smaller animals such as pigs or fowl. Remains of the walls may be seen either as mounds or banks or sometimes as obvious stone slabs, and often natural rocky outcrops were incorporated into the enclosures. It is likely that some fields were used for growing crops, with the walls keeping grazing animals out rather than in! Near the Garland Stone there is a short circular detour off the main path across a ridge where a group of nine small cairns have been identified (Point C). This probably is a prehistoric cemetery, with the cairns marking burial sites.

Around the coast: as you walk around the coast you will walk over or through the remains of many Iron Age walls. Often only the larger stones, or grounders remain, the smaller stones and rubble that would have filled the gaps having long disappeared, and as already noted natural rock outcrops tended to be incorporated into these walls. If you take the track from Skomer Head back to the Old Farm Complex, after a short distance you will come across both Iron Age and more modern boundary walls running parallel to each other (Point D); the modern one is close to the path and the prehistoric one on the rock ridge above.

Wick Valley (Point F): just off the main path opposite where the path from the Old Farmhouse Complex meets the path from The Wick to High Cliffs, there is one of the best examples of an Iron Age hut and associated small enclosures, clearly visible all year round. Unlike the hut circles in the north of the Island, here the hut is a single circle and a number of small enclosures can be seen around it; if you look across Wick Valley to the opposite slope, larger fields can also be made out.

Skomer Island History Factsheet

The Neck: looking at The Neck from High Cliffs or from the path alongside South Haven to Captain Kites, an obvious ditch and bank can be seen at South Castle. Unlike the rest of the Island there are few field boundaries to be seen on The Neck and it is thought that the whole of the area could have been used for grazing animals, with the ditch and bank fortification in the south offering an area where they could be herded and protected if there was any threat from the mainland.



Dams on Streams: between Skomer Head and The Wick you will cross Wick Stream (Point E). You will cross on top of a stone causeway or wall and if you look up and down the stream you may be able to pick out six others. These seven dams seem to adjoin and be part of the Iron Age walls but they might also be of much later origin. Their purpose is not known but most likely they were for water conservation, creating ponds for storage of water and watering stock. A number of similar, more substantial dams were also found on the course of North Stream at the bottom of North Stream Valley (not accessible to the public), again they could have been for water storage, and it has also been speculated that they might have been mediaeval fish ponds.

Further Information

There is further information about the history and early settlers on Skomer Island on the interpretation panels in the Old Farmhouse, and in Lockley Lodge.

A number of publications also contain more information:

Buxton J & R M Lockley (1950) *Island of Skomer*. Staples Press

Evans J G (1990) An Archaeological Survey of Skomer Island, Dyfed. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* Volume 56, Pages 243 – 267

Evans J G (1986) *Prehistoric Farmers of Skomer*. Dyfed Wildlife Trust (out of print)

Grimes W F (1950) Contributions to a Field Archaeology of Pembrokeshire: The Archaeology of Skomer Island. *Archaeologia Cambrensis* Volume C part 1, Pages 1-20

Skomer Island

Full timeline

Compiled by James Roden (Long Term Volunteer 2011)

35,000 yrs ago	Still connected to the mainland, little evidence of man except for flint flakes.
2-5000 yrs ago	Skomer was a bustling prehistoric settlement with as many as 250 people living here.
900's	The Vikings would have passed this way and sheltered in the islands' bays. The old name for Skomer is Skalmeye and means Isle of the Sword or Cloven isle.
Late 13th century	Rabbits introduced by the Normans. Island used as a rabbit warren or a 'coney island'.
1324	Skomer first appears in a document. This is in the valuation of Aymer de Valence, the Earl of Pembroke's estate after his death. The island is named as Scalmeye. (1)
1387	Appears in ministerial records of the King of England – two shillings paid for the 'repair of a house on the island of Scokholm and of another house on the island of Scalmey, for the use of the ferreters as well as for the storing of the rabbits.' In the same year there is an entry of 6s. 8d. received for 'the farm of birds.' This would refer to the seabirds nesting in the burrows and on the cliffs. (1)
14th - 16th centuries	Rent was paid for 'pasturage' for grazing of animals. The island still remained as a warren though. (4)
1452	'farm of birds' let to Phillip Meiller (3) Revenue of rabbits in decline and the pasturage and ferry rights brought in only 3s 8d, compared with £2 15s 0d in 1324.(3)
1472	Leased to farmer John Eliot (3)
1500	Leased to John Wogan (3)
1532	Henry VIII granted the rents Skomer and the other islands, to Anne Rocheford, daughter of Thomas, Earl of Wiltshire.(3)
1544	Leased to William Wogan, son of John. (3)
1567	Leased to Sir John Perrot. (3)
1588	As Lord-Deputy of Ireland, Perrot was under heavy financial pressure and severely raised the rents of his tenants, including those who lived on the Pembrokeshire islands. Many couldn't afford to meet these payments and by 1592 the islands had become uninhabited. (3)
1592	Perrot was attainted for treason and the islands were taken from him. (3)
1600s	Corn was grown. The field systems in the centre of the island suggest considerable activity.(4)
1700	First farm built in the place where the current one stands. This was gradually added too over the next 150 years. (1)
1800	Skomer held by John Summers as was Ramsey. (3)
1816	John Summers died and left his estate to his son William Bowlas Summers. (3)
1800-20s	Extension of corn growing and there is evidence of five step ploughing on the south facing slopes of North Valley. (4)

Skomer Island

Full timeline

1836	James Bowlas Summers inherits estate from his brother, William and holds Skomer jointly with Richard Edwards who resided on the island.
1840s	Owner Charles Phillips substantially improved the farmhouse, farm buildings and enclosures. The central fields were enclosed by a 10.5km stone wall, and used for growing arable crops, whilst the outer areas were grazed by livestock including sheep and cattle. (4)
1841	A census shows that there were more labourers on Skomer than at any other time. (3)
Late 1840s	Edward Robinson obtained a 21 year lease of the island. This was a very prosperous period for farming on the island due to the favourable financial conditions, but also because of Robinson's scientific farming methods which put land on the island to its best use. In this period he also bred game and recognised the rabbits as a valuable source of income.
1858	Vaughan Palmer Davies married Angelica Ellen Robinson, daughter of Edward Robinson. (5)
1861	Vaughan Palmer Davies returned from India, where he was the Captain of an opium brig and took over the lease of Skomer from his father in law, Edward Robinson. (5) The agricultural prosperity continued with mixed livestock, crop farming and the breeding of horses. (3)
Late 1870s	Decline of farming on Skomer. Arable land returned to pasture due to increasing costs, competition from increased imports and a number of wet harvests. Meat and dairy products from abroad were also being imported because of new refrigerated steamships. Rabbits became financial salvation. (3)
1892	Captain Davies leaves Skomer aged 66. (3)
1897	Skomer sold to 5 th Lord Kensington and was farmed by the tenant William Jones. However, the island was now also managed as a shoot. The island was again used as a rabbit warren and pheasant and partridge were introduced. (4) Robert Drane, from the Cardiff Naturalists' Society, first notices the unusual size of the voles on the island and is credited with discovering the Skomer Vole. (1)
1905	J. J Neale acquired the lease and took steps to safeguard the islands' wildlife. (4)
1909	J. J Neale banned landings and photography because of the disturbance to birds. (4)
1915	J. J Neale allowed the lease to lapse when his boys were all away at the war. He died in 1919 at 65. (3)
1920	Leased to George Edwards who used the island for the rabbits.
1922	Walter Sturt, a dentist, bought the island, but with no intention of farming it. (4)

Skomer Island

Full timeline

1930	Reuben Codd married William Sturt's daughter and farmed the island until 1939 and then again between 1946 and 1950. Between 1947-49 there were some 700 sheep grazing the island. (4)
1946	First major field work expedition by the West Wales Field Society, now the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales. This was reporting in 'Island of Skomer' by Lockley and Buxton. (4)
1949	Walter Sturt died. (4)
1950	Sold to Leonard Lee, a Midlands industrialist, who never lived on the island. The West Wales Field Society tried to raise the required money to buy the island, but failed. Reuben Codd continued to graze sheep on the island until 1958 and ferried visitors to island until 1959. (4)
1954	Farm house badly damaged in a storm. (4)
1955	First myxomatosis outbreak in rabbit population. (4)
1959	Skomer sold to the Countryside Council for Wales and declared as a National Nature Reserve. The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales took up the lease and have managed the island ever since. Commercial sheep flock replaced by Soay Ewes. In 1960 there were 24, but by 1964 they had all died. (4)
1960	David Saunders became first permanent Warden of Skomer Island National Nature Reserve (1960-66) (4) Goats were introduced as a milk supply.
1960s	I.W. Rowlands studied Skomer Vole size and reproduction of 8 years. (2)
1962-1971	Jackdaw population controlled with up to 88 killed a year. (2)
1967	Peter Corkhill became Warden (1967-73) (4)
October 1973	The last three goats removed from the island.
1974	John Davies became Warden (1974-76) The waters around the island declared as a voluntary marine nature reserve.
1976	Mike Alexander became Warden (1976-86) (4)
1979	Scheduled as an Ancient Monument by CADW Welsh Historic Monuments under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act. (4)
1981	A task force from Aberystwyth spent a week working on footpaths, repairing the tractor track from the harbour to the farmhouse and re-fencing rabbit enclosures. In that same year personnel from the naval air station at RAF Brawdy spent 3 weeks mending the quay in North Haven with 30 tons of sand and aggregates. (2)
1986	Steve Sutcliffe became Warden (1986-94) (4)
1990	Full marine nature reserve status.
1994	Simon Smith became Warden (1994-1999)
1999	Juan Brown became Warden (1999-2008) First full survey of Manx Shearwater numbers (2)

Skomer Island

Full timeline



2006-2008	Skomer Island Heritage Experience Project. Major building and improvements programme.
2008	Jo Milborrow became Warden (2008-2010)
2009	50 th anniversary of National Nature Reserve status.
2010	Chris Taylor became Warden (2010-)
2010	Official opening ceremony of Buildings b Carwyn Jones.

References:

- 1) *Island of Skomer*, John Buxton and R.M. Lockley, 1950
- 2) *Memories of Welsh Islands*, Mary E. Gillham, 2004
- 3) *The Sounds Between*, Roscoe Howells, 1968
- 4) *Skomer Island management plan*
- 5) *Pembrokeshire online record office* – Lots of letters and papers of the Robinson and Davies families are available at the Pembrokeshire Record Office.