

## The Mewstone

Like Wembury Point, the Mewstone - the striking wedge-shaped island just offshore – was once part of the Langdon Estate and is now owned by the National Trust. Today it hardly seems credible that anyone could make a home on the Mewstone, but in 1744 a local man guilty of some petty offence was sentenced by a magistrate to be ‘transported’ to the island for seven years. Not only did he remain there quietly with his family for the entire time without once setting foot on the mainland but, when the time came for the family to leave, his daughter chose to remain behind. ‘Black Joan’, as she was called, eventually married and had three children on the Mewstone before her husband drowned after falling off a rock.

Several inhabitants followed Black Joan, the last being Samuel Wakeham and his family. He enlarged an existing house there for his beloved wife Ann (whom he married in 1833 in Wembury Church), thus creating a highly unusual turreted building. Today this can still be seen clearly from the mainland with binoculars, the best viewpoint being from Wembury cliffs, east of the beach. Sam also created a garden by clearing stones and manuring the land with seaweed and sand carried up from the beach. Poultry and a couple of pigs were kept, and the island was the warren for the Langdon Estate. Living rent free, Sam protected the rabbits from poachers by, it is said, putting a bullet through their coat tails to warn them off before any bones were broken. During the proper season, Sam and his family were allowed to shoot and eat as many rabbits as they wished.

Sam’s life on the Mewstone was less isolated than that of some earlier residents. A magazine article about the island published in 1834 reported that:

*“The Mewstone is about five miles from Plymouth. Anyone of the old gentlemen who ply for hire at the Barbican with shore boats will convey you thither for a crown’ and advised the reader ‘as you value your character for benevolence, export a few ounces of snuff to Sam, [as] he is a most inveterate snuff taker.’*

Sam himself encouraged visitors, no doubt to boost his income. Writing to the same magazine he announced that if visitors made their way to the shore at Wembury ‘*and holds up there white pockethandcheuffs for a signal . . . ile cum off in me bote and fetch them to the island for two pence appease.*’

For the benefit of day trippers in general, he had mounted a flagstaff on the island, cut steps for the ladies and, in the magazine’s words, ‘*hewed out of the solid rock a pair of thrones, wherein the lover of nature may sit and indulge his solitary musings.*’

Sam’s undoing was that he was also a smuggler, and was eventually lured into a trap by a wily excise man. Returned to the mainland, he afterwards earned his living as a boatman plying from Plymouth’s Barbican steps. As far as is known, nobody has lived on the island since, although the cottage may have been used for picnics, etc, by the inhabitants of Langdon Hall. Sold off when the Langdon Estate was broken up in 1927, the Mewstone was later bought by a lady as a wedding present (!) for her brother, and in the 1930s the cottage was restored.

After World War II the Mewstone was purchased by the War Office as it lay in the line of fire from the HMS Cambridge gunnery school. At this point the island was placed out of bounds to the public, benefiting its wildlife in general and sea birds in particular. Throughout the years of government ownership, almost the only visitors permitted were ornithologists monitoring the birds.

The closure of HMS Cambridge in 2001 threatened to end this environmental protection, but this was averted in 2006 when the National Trust was able to purchase the island along with the entire HMS Cambridge site on Wembury Point. As in other environmentally sensitive localities, National Trust policy is to continue exclusion of the public in order to safeguard the bird populations attracted by the Mewstone’s rare isolation.