

The life and times of a Tresco ancestor

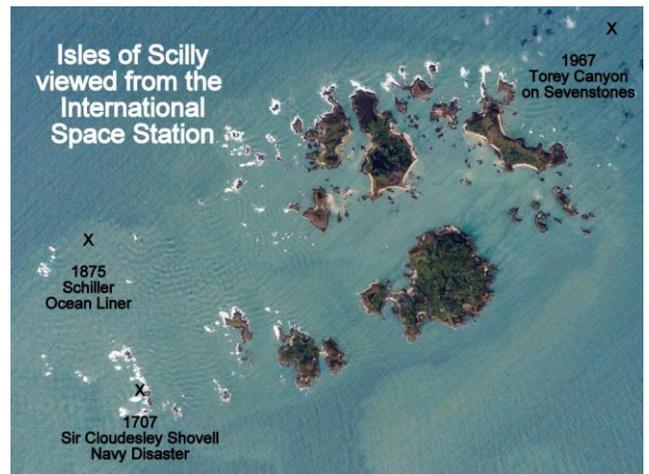
John Webb, July 2013

For those of us who enjoy the search for our ancestors, we know that the path is often strewn with brick walls, diversions and amazing stories. This was certainly true as John Webb provided a multi-media presentation on the life and times of his GG Grandfather, *John Jenkins*.

Family memories had it that he had been a coastguard and had been born in Tresco, Isles of Scilly. So the intriguing question was; “If the Isles of Scilly were known as The Fortunate Islands, why did John Jenkins run away to sea?”

As background, the presentation began with the legends around Scilly as well as its ancient, medieval and modern history. The folk memory starts with the fabled “tin islands” and moved on to the penal colonies of Roman times and the legends of Lyonesse and the final resting place of King Arthur. An uncertain history started with the Benedictine Abbey on Tresco around 1000AD and through many invasions and marauders, took us to the early Elizabethan age.

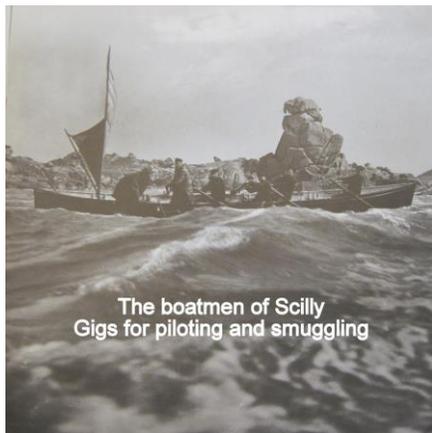
Even the geography of the Isles of Scilly had developed during this time period. Since Roman times, the rise in sea level and the fall of the land had altered Scilly from one land mass to the collection of islands that we know today; five inhabited and hundreds of smaller islands and rocks. St Mary’s was the main island with Hugh Town the capital, while the other inhabited islands were known as the off-islands.



Sadly, until the proper means to determine Longitude at sea was established, Scilly was more famous for its shipwrecks than its people and the Valhalla maritime museum of Figureheads and ship Nameplates was evidence to that risk. A quick summary of modern history followed, which so often, centered around wars and disputes, and introduced the role of Scilly during the Armada of 1588, the Civil War of the 1640’s, the Napoleonic war of 1805-1815, and the two World Wars. But it was Good Queen Bess who established a semblance of law and order on Scilly with the appointment of Sir Francis Godolphin, of Godolphin, Cornwall

as the Lord Protector. Scilly had become critical as the gateway to the New World, and the key to England's defence during her many disputes with her European neighbours. Through the efforts of the Godolphin's, the defence of Scilly was ensured with castles on St Mary's and Tresco.

Fortunately, the social history is better documented with a number of books from visitors during the 18th century. It was reported that life was tough but bearable. Industry was farming, fishing and kelp making, with piloting and smuggling on the side, plus trading with passing ships. Scilly was home to many pilots. Their gigs carried contraband but also ensured that ships made safe passage into and out of the islands. This was extremely dangerous, and sadly, the number of male Scillonians who died peacefully in their cottage must have been extremely small. Smuggling of wine, spirits and tobacco was lucrative, but meant 100 miles each way to France. In 1684, the Nance family from Falmouth introduced the kelp industry. For the next 150 years, it was the main source of employment on Scilly. Seaweed was gathered, dried and burned in small stone-lined pits. It took more than 20 tons of weed to produce each ton of kelp. This fetched about £5 in the glass and soap-making trades of Bristol and Gloucester.



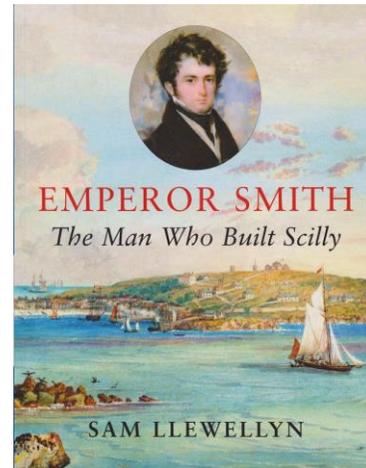
Cottages were low, built of granite, roofed with thatch held by straw ropes, and furnished from wrecks. A Scilly Prayer is often quoted:

"We pray thee, O Lord, not that wrecks should happen, but that if they should happen, that thou wilt guide them into the Scillies for the benefit of the poore inhabitants".

War had meant prosperity for Scilly, it was the first landfall, social calls, and pilotage. The Napoleonic Wars, with increased military and naval activity, brought financial benefit, not least with the trade in locally grown potatoes. Sadly, the

benefits were felt mainly on the main island, St Mary's, and less so on the off-islands, including Tresco. Fortunately, the SPCK, "The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge", who were dedicated to communicating the Christian faith by means of education, sent their missionaries to the off-islands in 1775. The Society had a significant and positive influence on schooling in Scilly, with 80 students in Tresco in 1822.

Major changes occurred in Scilly in the 1830's. The Godolphin family chose not to renew the lease. A series of crop failures had left the off-islanders starving and totally dependent on charity. And then along came Smith, Augustus Smith, with money from banking. Raised in Hertfordshire and with a firm belief in education, in 1834, he took a 99-year lease on the Islands.



He was interested in 'improving the lot of the labouring classes' and Scilly (for years misruled by the agents of absentee landlords and struggling under difficult economic conditions) represented the ideal challenge. He evicted many islanders on the basis that the islands were over-populated and compelled children of larger families to find work on the mainland.

Those least able to support themselves were the first to go. Clearly linked with this revolution in primary education was his determination to have no idle, listless and illiterate young men or women loafing about the Islands, depending on the labour and charity of others. He gave the young men clearly to understand that there was no room in the Scilly he had planned for non-productive youths. They must make their way in the world, either by going to sea, or by entering into some other form of service, or in learning one of the many trades which were then developing. While thought of as a Benign Dictator, this was sensible direction by a wise planner, and in course of time the people realised how right he was. This background helps understand the early life of *John Jenkins*.

From the records, it was determined that he was born in 1813, in Tresco, Isles of Scilly, married in Falmouth in 1840, and died 1889 in Penryn, Cornwall, at the grand old age of 76 after a life in the navy and the coastguard service. So, the

question remained; why did *John Jenkins* run away to sea? A clue was found in a book from the: *The Isles of Scilly; a constitutional, economic, and social survey of the development of an island people from early times to 1900*, by Gordon Forrester Matthews that covered the second Phase of the Distresses, from 1822 to 1834.” That is, during *John Jenkins*’ childhood and formative years.

It certainly was the Dark Side. 1814 had brought peace, but also feast and famine, leading to extreme poverty for off-islanders. Also, the post-war failure of the ling fishery, the decline of kelping, bad harvests and a peacetime slump in pilotage all combined to bring destitution to Scilly. The economic collapse, of the approach of which there had been many warnings since the middle of the eighteenth century, fell with especial severity on all the off-islands in 1818, and with but one short period of recovery, continued in degrees of varying intensity and for various reasons until 1834. The residents survived with farm potatoes or corn (wheat) and barter from passing ships. In a report by the SPCK:

“Many derived their subsistence almost entirely from limpets and other kinds of shell-fish, and were compelled to gather fresh herbs as a substitute for tea. Some too had been obliged to use articles of furniture as fuel during the severest weather, and had little other clothing to cover them by night than the ragged garments they wore during the day”.

It concluded by expressing an opinion which was at once suggestive and disturbing—that the administration of charity was not altogether a good thing. "It is evident that the mere administration of charity to those capable of labour, dispirits from exertion, leaving the sufferers in a more abject condition than before."

So *John Jenkins* had spent his years on Tresco until the age of 19 during a “perfect storm” of starvation, crop failure, and reliance of SPCK missionary schooling and charity. He was the second son and not likely to inherit sufficient property to survive. HMS Goldfinch was the way out. He volunteered and was not “impressed”. Unfortunately, after the Napoleonic war, the Navy reduced the fleet, and *John Jenkins* transferred to the Coastguard service. He served in Ireland and Cornwall, and never looked back, which brings the presentation back to the Tresco of today.

The Duchy had taken back its lease in the 1920’s on all the islands apart from Tresco. Tresco is now run by the descendants of Augustus Smith, the Dorian-Smith family, as a private estate and marketed as a sophisticated, unspoilt, island paradise. Sadly, they have lost the direct helicopter ride from Penzance. Travellers

now use the Scillonian III, also known as “*The Big White Stomach Pump*”. The Jenkins family home is now a timeshare cottage: Sleeps 6 / 3 Bedrooms.



To wrap up the presentation, John described what he had learnt about his Tresco-Cornish roots? Did he still have Island Connections? Sadly not. GGG Grandfather John had died on Tresco at the age of 64 of acute dysentery, and wife Ann died at age 72 of tuberculosis. The elder son Benjamin had lived in the house until he died in 1887 at age 76, without children.

Then, there is the problem of genealogy on the Isles of Scilly. As most family historians know, family history on these islands can be very hit and miss. No Parish Registers survive from before 1726 and there are no Bishops Transcripts. Many people on the off-islands were born, named, "married" and died without the benefit of church service. And there was significant depopulation in both the 1550's and 1660's. The majority of the Scillonian families can only trace their association with the islands back to the 17th Century when their ancestors came to Scilly during the post-Civil War resettlement.

To add confusion, it is recognised that if your line included Jenkin, Ellis, Woodcock or Hicks, your search is even more difficult due to the preponderance of these names. Then, it is written that the Jenkins' of Tresco may be descended from the influx of Welsh immigrants who transferred over after the 1640 civil war. Alternatively, according to the on-line Jenkins family tree, the first Jenkins came to the Scilly Isles in the 1730's. Whatever, over the years the Jenkins numbers grew and the Jenkins today in Scilly represents a significant proportion of the population of the Tresco and Bryher islands.

Whatever his connections to Scilly, John can claim his Cornish heritage through his other Great, Greats; from St Keverne, from Mylor and from St Just in Roseland. Which took him to the final item of his presentation, “Cornwall, my home” by Harry Glasson. The best song about Cornwall that has ever been written:

*First thing in the morning, on Chapel Carn Brea
And gaze at the Scillies, in the blue far away.
For this is my Cornwall, and I'll tell you why
Because I was born here and here I shall die
And no one will ever, move me from this land
Until the Lord calls me, to sit at his hand
For this is my Eden, and I'm not alone,
For this is my Cornwall, and this is my home*