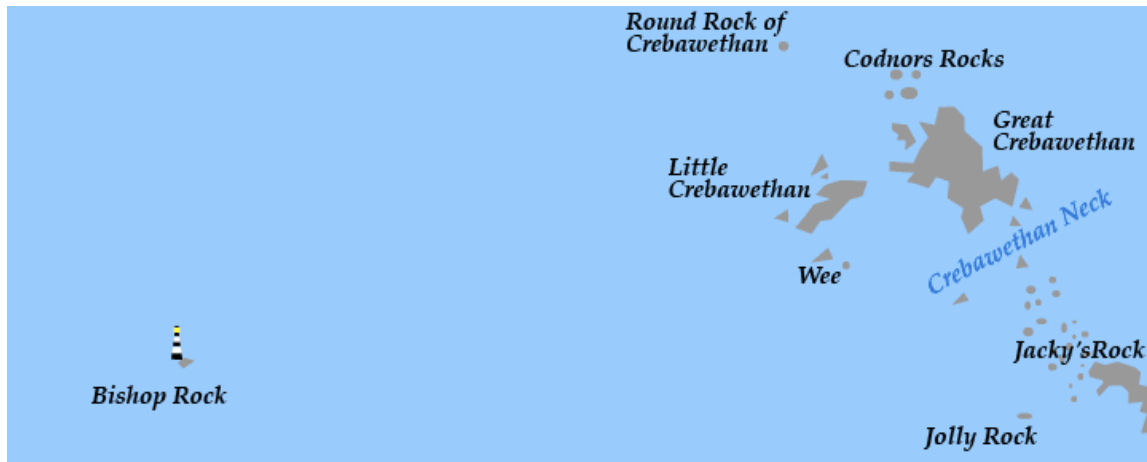




Isles of Scilly

Bishop Rock Lighthouse



One of the great things about walking in the Westcountry is you get to explore some fantastic out of the way places. And they don't get much more out of the way than the Bishop Rock Lighthouse. This is the real Land's End – but you will not be doing much in the way of walking if you get the chance to journey out past the Scillies.

However, a voyage to Britain's most South Westerly bit of terra firma is well worthwhile and it will give you an opportunity to give your feet a rest after you've walked around all those beautiful Scillonian islands.

As your boat leaps and bounds around the base of Bishop Rock – which it does even on the calmest day of the year – you realise that this is it: there's no more land now until you reach New York.

The Bishop Rock is scary – even on the calmest day of the year. Which is exactly what St Agnes boatman John Peacock decreed it to be the day we went out West recently.

"You are very lucky, this is about as good as it gets," smiled John as we heaved up and down a few yards off Great Britain's most southwesterly bit of terra firma.

We'd just been dallying a while during our passage through the ferocious and lethal Western Rocks on the way out from the main Scillonian archipelago, across the four miles of sea to the Bishop, and John had told us that most days of the year he simply wouldn't have brought his boat through some of the narrow channels between the hull-crunching, but somehow beautiful, jagged stacks.

The Bishop Rock Lighthouse is one of the finest feats of engineering to be found around our shores, which may sound like a bit of an exaggeration until you actually go out into that heaving ocean to witness what it can do. I remember seeing one of the tower's thick steel doors that had been taken to a museum – it looked like a paper bag that had been punched by a boxer, and it had been found embedded in the wall opposite the open portal where its job had been to keep out the ocean.

The waves west of Scilly can get very big indeed – often is the time I have peered through binoculars in winter from the comparatively safe shores of St Agnes and watched as the lighthouse has completely disappeared from view in mountains of spray and spume.

Just how the 49-metre tower defies the constant buffeting of these giant swells is difficult to imagine. The tower stands on a rock ledge that rises sheer from a depth of 45 metres from the seabed – and this may give you some clue as to why it was so important to have some kind of warning system out there in the middle of nowhere.

As John Peacock demonstrated on the “calm” day we were there, sailors in days of yore relied on plumb-lines to get their bearings in foggy weather. John threw a weighted line overboard and down it sank more than six fathoms – a sailor gauging the line would think he was in no danger whatsoever of hitting anything, and yet we were only feet from the 46 by 16 metre ledge that is the Bishop Rock.

A great many people died out in this most inhospitable of areas down the years, including the 2,000 or so sailors of Sir Cloudesley Shovel's squadron in 1703. After that it was decided that the warning system for the Scillies was completely inadequate – consisting, as it did, just the single old coal-fired lighthouse on St Agnes.

Trinity House's engineer-in-chief, James Walker, believed it would be impossible to build a solid stone tower on Scilly's most westerly rock simply because the ledge was too small. He also claimed such a tower would not withstand the tremendous seas, demonstrating that the wind pressures here sometimes exceeded 7,000 lb per square foot.

And so, in 1847, Trinity House elected to build a £12,000 screw-pile lighthouse erected on cast iron legs supported by wrought iron rods. The idea was that the waves would crash right through the piles instead of slamming into a solid masonry tower.

Within two years such a superstructure was complete and all that was required was a lighting apparatus, the installation of which would have to wait until the following spring. However, on the night of 5th February 1850, a violent gale carried away the whole shooting match, rods and all.

Walker shrugged off the news and did a U-turn. What was required, he thought, was a granite tower based upon Smeaton's Eddystone.

The concept of building such a complex and heavy structure in such a terrifying place really does stretch the imagination. It took us an hour to reach Bishop Rock in a modern launch

– how would men a century and a half ago be expected to commute the four most dangerous miles in Britain?

The answer was to be found on the tiny isle of Rosevear – a chunk of rock just big enough to have its own tiny hinterland. John Peacock took us to this lonesome place on our journey out to the Bishop and, passing through the narrow and hazardous gap that exists between it and the islet of Rosevean, we were able to see the remains of the one or two stone cottages that were built out here to house those brave builders.

The gable ends that stand just above the boulders of the beach are all that remain of the most southwesterly homes ever to have existed in Britain.

The men commuted to and from the light whenever the weather permitted, which wasn't often. The raw granite was brought over from the mainland to the island where it was shaped and numbered before being sent on to the most exposed building site in history.

The 35 metre high tower contained 2,500 tons of granite and cost £34,560. It took seven years to complete the tower and the light was finally lit on the 1st September 1858.

Just over 20 years later Sir James Douglass made an inspection of the tower and reported widespread damage and general weakness in the structure and it was decided to strengthen the tower and to increase its height by 12 metres.

Much of this new work was centred on a huge cylindrical base designed to create a kind of buffer upon which the power of the giant waves would be dissipated before they could hit the tower itself. The plan obviously worked - the work was completed in October 1887 at a cost of £66,000 and the Bishop Rock Lighthouse has been standing loud and proud ever since.

Not quite as proud as it once was, mind. The light was converted to automatic operation in 1991 and the last keepers quit the place on 21 December 1992. Helicopters now convey Trinity House engineers out to service the light and they obtain access from the roof.

Nothing lives or stirs in the great granite cylinder below. Where men once lived, now only the ghosts of drowned mariners moan in a wind that never, ever, ceases out here at the real Land's End. The empty tower is as spooky a place as I've ever seen which, in a way, resonates well with the vast emptiness of ocean that lies beyond.