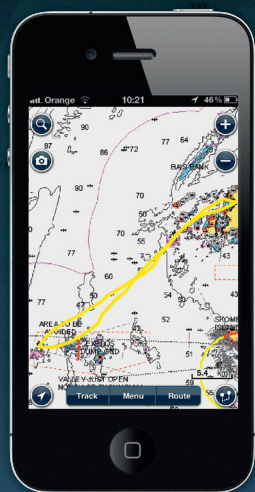




A PEMBROKESHIRE SEA KAYAKING ADVENTURE

A Journey to Smalls

Lighthouses feature greatly in sea kayakers lives; they provide a navigation light at night and impressive structures to photograph in the day. I had never seen a photograph of a sea kayak at the Smalls Lighthouse, not surprising really as it the most isolated of all the Trinity Lighthouses. Located on the farthest of the Pembrokeshire islands from the mainland, sea kayaking to the Smalls had been on my 'to do' list for a while. At twenty-one miles offshore and maybe only fifty square metres visible at high water, it was a small target to find. Getting there would involve navigating the infamous Bishops and Clerks as well as up to four knot tides around the Smalls themselves. Only Stuart Yendle volunteered to join me, he's been wanting to cross the Irish Sea by sea kayak so this was an ideal warm up trip for him.

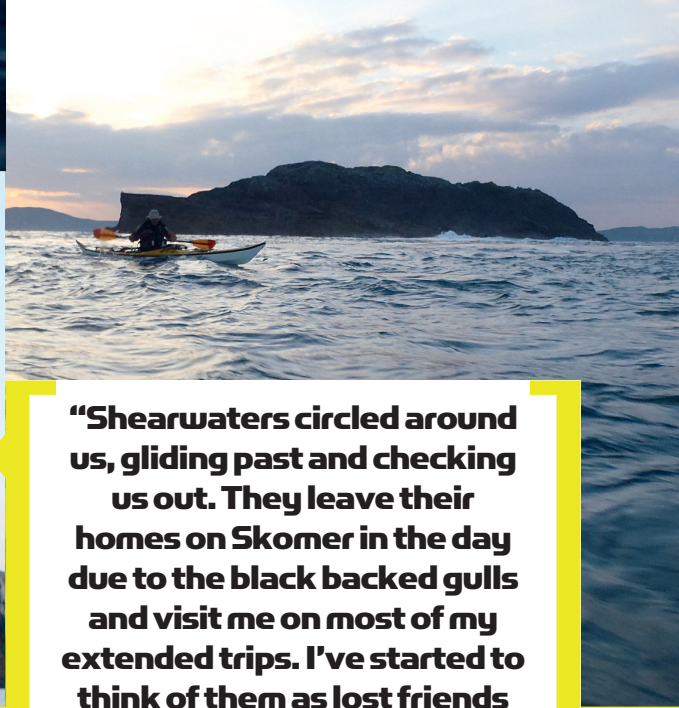


The plan was simple; we worked out the tides, distance and time we'd need to arrive. It was pretty much head west from Whitesands on the ebb tide to the Smalls to arrive a little before slack water. Wait for the tide to turn and then come back up on the flood by heading east again. The forecast suggested that we could expect force three to four easterly winds between 1000 and 1300, otherwise less than force three. The sea state was forecast to pick up to slight to moderate around the same time. We calculated around four each way, although this would be more for the journey back due to the headwind expected; also we were leaving at the start of the flood and by the time we would arrive at Ramsey the tide at St. David's Head would be getting ready to ebb again.

EARLY DOORS & LOST FRIENDS

We were up early Friday morning, needing to catch the tide from St. David's Head at 6am. The streetlights outside my house were still off when we left and the sun was still sleeping when we arrived at Whitesands Bay. The Bishops and Clerks were rising mysteriously from the misty waters on the horizon across and the light from South Bishop cast it's eye towards us every five seconds. It was a beautiful morning as we packed our sea kayaks and readied ourselves for this committing trip.

We confirmed our plans with the coastguard before we left the bay and headed off towards the Bishops, the sun rising behind us above St. David's Head a little while later. Shearwaters circled around us, gliding



“Shearwaters circled around us, gliding past and checking us out. They leave their homes on Skomer in the day due to the black backed gulls and visit me on most of my extended trips. I’ve started to think of them as lost friends keeping an eye out for me. It’s these moments that help me to realise why I love sea kayaking so much.”

Lighthouse

Article & images by Mike Mayberry

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We reached South Bishop lighthouse before the hour; the three-knot tide helping us through the islands quickly and by the time of our first break St. David’s Head was a long way behind us. The sea was almost mirror smooth with no sign yet of the wind.

RICH HISTORY & A GRISLY TALE

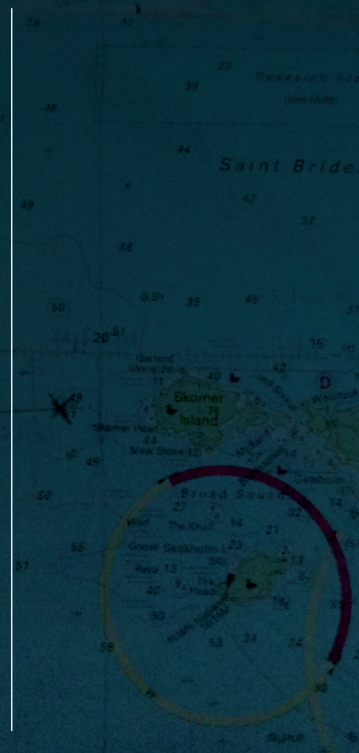
By the time of our second break we were well out to sea and St. David’s Head was almost gone from view. The Smalls Lighthouse was only just visible on the horizon. We had a couple of dolphins pass us by but typically they didn’t resurface once we had our cameras ready. Porpoise also made a brief appearance during the trip out.

Another hour and we were now able to make out the colour of the lighthouse. We knew that we were going

to easily hit our target and were able to see how small the reef really was. It only took us another half hour to reach the lighthouse and we were able to get the photographs I’d talked about getting for so long.

The reef was covered in seals and gulls, none of whom seemed particularly bothered by our arrival. We didn’t want to land as this is their home and we are only guests; we discussed heading east on the last of the ebb tide to try and take in Grassholm as well but around the other side we found some steps and no seals so we took the opportunity to stretch our legs instead.

The original Smalls lighthouse consisted of an octagonal timber house supported by a top of nine pillars spaced around a central timber post. It was 66ft tall, was built at Solva and taken whole to the rock for assembly. Although it had been designed to allow the waves to pass through the structure it suffered considerable damage, underwent continual maintenance and was eventually replaced by the current tower in 1961. The remains of this original lighthouse built in 1776 are still there today. ▶



In 1801 there was an awful tragedy at the Smalls Lighthouse. At that time Tom Howells and Tom Griffiths were the keepers. They were known to dislike one another and arguments were common. Usually the keepers were changed after a month but due to bad weather and storms, no boats could reach them. They were together for four months on the lighthouse and one evening, following a row, Tom Griffiths collapsed and died of a head injury. Tom Howells, concerned that people would think he'd murdered him if he followed the traditional sea burial, made a make shift coffin and tied it to the railings of the balcony. Passing ships logged a 'strange object' but never raised an alarm.

Relief boats to the lighthouse were still being hampered by the weather and the coffin was smashed by the storms resulting in the corpse hanging across the balcony with an arm caught in the railings. By

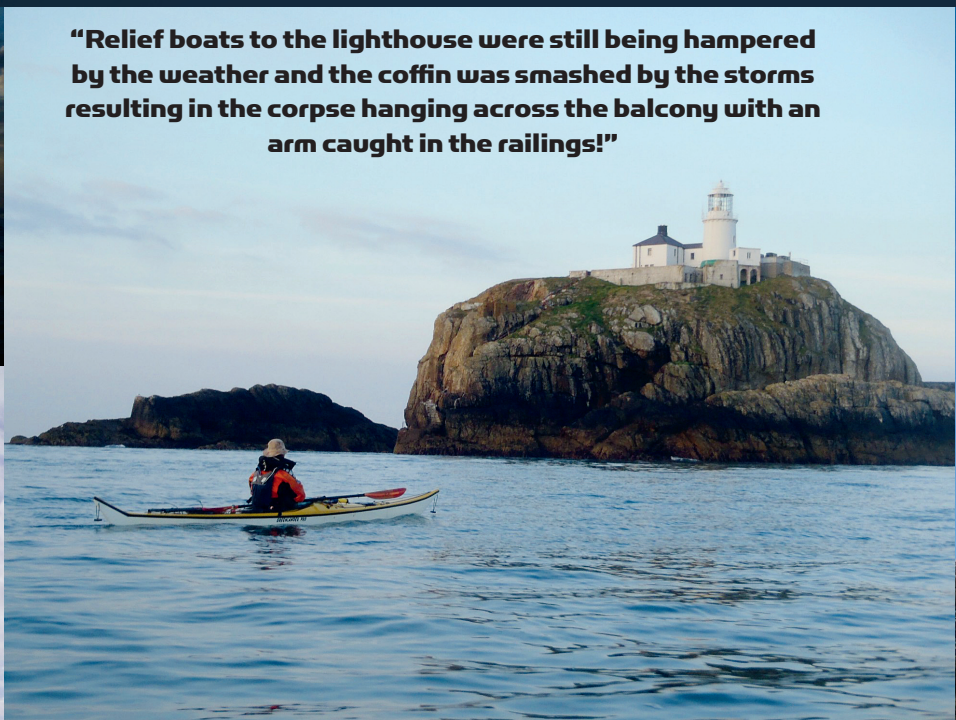
the time boats were able to reach the lighthouse Tom Howells had gone mad through loneliness and terror. It was following this incident that three keepers were assigned to every lighthouse until they were all automated in 1998.

THE RETURN

As we were getting ready to launch again we could hear a dive boat approaching. Once we were on the water someone was frantically waving so we went over. I think Stuart was surprised we had seen anybody this far offshore and even more so when it turned out to be someone I knew! It was Tom and Lou Luddington from the Pembrokeshire Outdoor Charter Group.

Heading back to the Pembrokeshire mainland was a little more tricky than getting out there. We were leaving at the start of the flood and by the

"Relief boats to the lighthouse were still being hampered by the weather and the coffin was smashed by the storms resulting in the corpse hanging across the balcony with an arm caught in the railings!"



time we would arrive at the Bishops and the Clerks we would be catching the last of the tide there. Add to this the easterly wind in our face now and progress was much slower.

It seemed to take an age for Ramsey Island to appear on the horizon, the wind costing us 25% of our usual progress. We hadn't decided which side of Ramsey Island we would pass. I hoped that we could make it across to pass through the sound, as a quick surf at the Bitches would have made a great end to the trip. The headwind eased again after two hours but it had already had enough of an effect on us to mean that we would be passing Ramsey to the west, once again travelling through the Bishops and Clerks, no great loss!

We arrived at South Bishop lighthouse an hour before the tide across to the mainland would turn against us

and had easy conditions to navigate our sea kayaks through the Bishops and Clerks waters.

Once back safely in Whitesands Bay we called in to the coastguard and looked out for Martyn Armstrong who said he'd meet us with a floating flotilla. He was nowhere to be seen but then we were an hour later than we'd told him. The wind cost us half an hour and Stuart's bladder (!) had cost us the same. He really was in great pain with it, something he's learned for his next crossing, hopefully.

We headed towards the beach, full of tourists that were utilising almost every inch of available beach space. To our right a creek boat's occupant was paddling hard and trying to attract our attention, it was Martyn. He'd heard us call in to the coastguard and launched to meet us, great timing, as he was able to get the only photos of the two of us together on the trip.

NO SMALL ACHIEVEMENT!

As we hobbled up the beach at the Whitesands with the sea kayaks, we felt very overdressed and attracted a few strange looks; none of them aware that we'd navigated some of the UK's strongest tides to arrive at a destination twenty-one miles away and made it back safely too.

The navionics track of our route paddled exactly matched our plan and showed that we had sea kayaked a distance of 69.4km, been gone for over 11 hours, average speed 6.2km/h and maximum speed 14.5km/h.

We've since heard that the first successful sea kayaking trip to the Smalls Lighthouse was in 1984, led by Nigel Foster. He says that in the years following there were a few unsuccessful attempts. As far as we know, we are only the second people to sea kayak to the Smalls. **CF**

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