



## Steep Holm Island

The lonely island of Steep Holm sits in the Bristol Channel, midway between England and Wales and is a 60 acre limestone rock. It is now uninhabited, except for the birds who find sanctuary there, but people lived and worked there from pre-historic times until the 1900s.



*Steep Holm as seen from the front at Weston © Mike Peel*

Past archaeological investigations have discovered scrapers from the Neolithic period, tools from the Mesolithic period and a stone head, which is on display in the museum and is possibly from a sacred site in use during the Iron Age or Roman era.

**The Romans made use of the island by building a signal station to enable them to watch for enemies travelling up, down and across the channel. They left behind pieces of hypocaust, samian ware pottery, amphora and coins.**

In approximately 540, Gildas, a hermit and monk, lived on Steep Holm and wrote the story 'De Excidio Britanniae' (the decline of Roman Britain into the Dark Ages). He lived alone on the island but was troubled by raiding pirates who sailed up and down the River Severn.

The Priory of St Michael of Steep Holm was founded towards the end of the 1100s, some years earlier than the nearby Woodspring Priory. Several charters exist in evidence, the earliest being by Robert, son of Richard, giving Uphill Church to the brothers of St. Michael's to help supplement their income. The small group of monks would have eaten fish, limpets, possibly rabbits and kept goats for their milk.

There are still many herbs growing on the island e.g. Wild Peony which only grows on this island, Alexanders, wild Leek, Caper Spurge, Henbane and Cuckoo Pint, all used in medieval times as food or medicine, suggesting that the monks were treating sick people. The Priory of St Michael closed around 1260 and the remaining monks transferred to Stodleigh (Studley) in Worcester (the original founders of the Priory).



*A derelict building on Steep Holm © Ben Hollier*

Archaeological evidence points to a later rebuilding phase on the island and in 1315 it was claimed that Maurice, 7th Lord of Berkeley, had built a 'Friary on the place called the Homes'. Unfortunately no records have survived to prove this. It is suggested that he established a network of people who kept rabbit warrens there.

The family had already owned certain fishing rights in the 'Seaverne' since at least the mid-1100s. Archaeologists recorded a huge dump of rabbit and fish bones in a building which had been vacated by the monks.

The Berkeley family were unable to keep Steep Holm as Lord Maurice was arrested and imprisoned until his death in May 1326. His family wealth was given to the King, Edward II, who in turn was imprisoned in Berkeley Castle and murdered. Family feuds and skirmishes carried on for years and Steep Holm became neglected.

Sometime before 1562, William Turner, (later to become Dean of Wells), undertook the hazardous journey to Steep Holm and noted the first official British record of Alexanders in his second volume of Herball.



*A rusted 1800s cannon on Steep Holm © GloomyCorp*

A bailiff who visited the island in 1625 decided that the island was only profitable for a short fowling season as the rabbit population had decreased and its meat tasted strongly of privet and garlic.

During the 1700s and 1800s Steep Holm was used extensively for smuggling. The Reverend John Ashley described how, on 28 March 1843: "...a landing of brandy was effected on the island, advantage being taken of its lonely situation to keep it in the rocks till opportunity admitted of its being taken to the mainland."

The Napoleonic wars of 1803 – 1815 saw the island being used in the defence of the Bristol Channel and much construction taking place e.g. ammunition stores, a barracks, an underground water tank, storehouses, a pier, a landing place and roads.

During the First World War (1914 – 1918) Steep Holm was re-fortified and used as a watching station by coastguards to detect any enemy ships travelling up the estuary.



*Rudder Rock on Steep Holm's western edge © Ben Hollier*

Then, in the Second World War, from 1940 to 1944, the Admiralty requisitioned the island for use as part of the Severn Defences.

After the war the Steep Holm Trust leased the island until March 1953. The island was made a Site of Special Scientific Interest and was to be used for archaeological, scientific and educational purposes.

Steep Holm was sold to the Kenneth Allsop Memorial Trust in 1976 for £10,000 and is still owned and managed by the trust. Today, it is possible to visit the island during the summer months on a day trip to experience its wonderful panoramic views.

