



# Firebrand IV

The Scilly Isles is one of the most beautiful places in Britain. The clear water, white sandy beaches and unspoilt islands make it a haven for tourists.

**T**hey are also very popular with boaters of all types. Being set out almost into the Atlantic it is seen as a bit of an adventure to get there. In reality it is not far or difficult but the stretch of water between Falmouth or Penzance, the two most popular departure points, can be nasty: five tides converge here and the bottom is very uneven, throwing up seas from all directions, which tends to put boaters off from making the passage in all but the most favourable of conditions.

Fortunately for the Scilly Isles there are two reliable forms of transport to bring their visitors in. There is a regular flight from Penzance, but not in the normal sense, in that the Scillies are served by a large, passenger-carrying helicopter rather than a light aircraft. The other, more traditional route is to make the crossing on the Scillonian III, a passenger ferry that also brings over much of the freight that is required on the islands. These quirks,

together with the stunning scenery once you are there, make the Scillies a very different holiday destination.

The low-lying islands are visible from the mainland on a clear day, but from the water they can be difficult to see if there is any haze. For visiting boaters this aspect should be noted as it is easy to miss them if your navigation is suspect. Plot your course, taking the tidal offset into consideration, and then check it carefully. When you set off on your passage, concentrate and steer accurately. The waters surrounding the islands are full of isolated rocks, and the channels between the islands are shallow, so you need to pay heed to your chart and stick to the clear routes. The Scillies have over 1,000 wrecks around them, a surprising number of which are recent ones, so even modern electronics are no guarantee against mishap. This is one place where knowing the waters and having a good eye is still an



important aspect of navigation.

With the influx of visitors there are good opportunities for the local boatmen to transport the visitors between the different islands in the group, for which there is also an inter-island ferry service at very reasonable cost, and there are also various boat trips in operation. Only one of them is RIB-based, though, and that is Firebrand IV, a 7.8m Ribcraft sporting a single Yamaha F225 outboard. The operation is run by husband-and-wife team, Mark and Susie Groves. They have been running these trips for several years, but only the last two in this RIB. Mark was a commercial diver and he also ran a dive support vessel, so he has an intimate knowledge of the waters surrounding the islands. He has found a few important and lucrative wrecks in his time, but now he is happy to take visitors out to show them the parts of the islands they would never otherwise see, and to tell them

stories and anecdotes that make some of the history of these charming little isles.

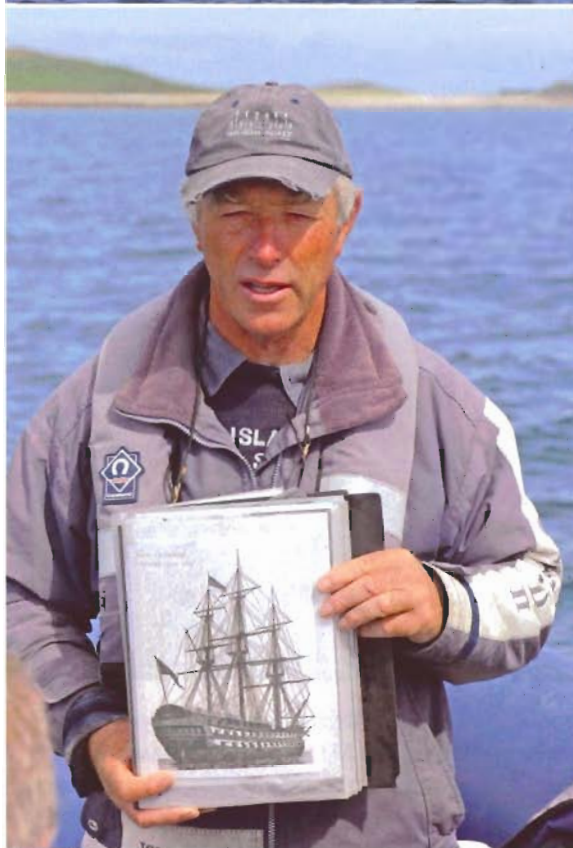
The trips on Firebrand tend to be about 15 miles in total and take around two to two and a half hours. They take in a series of shipwrecks and both Mark and Susie tell the stories of these wrecks. They both have an avid interest in the history of the wrecks around the islands and this adds a real interest to what would otherwise just be a few sharp traces on the echo sounder. The commentary has a way of transporting the audience back in time, so they can imagine what it must have been like to be stranded in these inhospitable, storm-lashed waters with the fury of the sea all around. The trace from the echo sounder shows the shape of some of these hulks lying on the seabed, others are just a few encrusted plates lying on the bottom. To enable the visitors on the boat to

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see these shapes there is a Raymarine M1500 marine monitor fitted towards the bow. This massive monitor screen can be used to show any of the linked systems. So even the navigation systems can be flashed up should anyone show an interest. The conversation during the trip is very fluid.

The trips do not follow a rigid schedule, but mould themselves to the conditions, what is happening and the conversation that ensues. Each section of the planned trip is included, but there is no rigid, repetitive commentary. The wildlife that abounds is one of the main attractions for people to take the trips. There are many seals on the rocks and they blend beautifully with the barnacle-and-weed-covered granite rocks. The seals vary tremendously in colour, but they seem to blend into the background as if they had been painted into place. They are used to seeing the boats but they are still wary when ashore. Once they slide into the water many of them become curious, especially when Mark shuts the engine down and everyone sits still and quiet. Then the younger seals will swim over to investigate.

Another facet of the islands is their





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video screen. The trips for the school parties are slightly shorter, at one and a half hours duration. The talks revolve around the sea, nature, navigation, weather, geography and general knowledge of the maritime world. Mark tells about the tides and how the moon creates them, the rock formations that can be seen around the islands and how the weather patterns make the great storms that batter the islands during the winter months. He is well qualified to do this as he was a diving instructor and ran a diving school for many years. His gentle voice and that of Susie's hold

their passengers spellbound and they get off wanting more. That is the idea. Most of their parties are made up of repeat bookings; people come back year after year, never tiring of the stories and the nature that this trip is formulated around.

The boat itself is Mark's second Ribcraft with Yamaha power. The previous boat was another 7.8m, in his eyes the ideal boat for this kind of operation. When the current Firebrand was built Mark changed the layout and went for an aft conning deck rather than a forward helm. It makes a big difference to how the passengers can enjoy the trip; they have an uninterrupted view from the passenger deck, whilst Mark has a commanding view over his charges and the water ahead. This gives him and Susie a better view to spot the wildlife for their customers, and they can point things out without standing in the way.

There is a slight trade-off in fuel economy with the aft conning deck layout. The previous Ribcraft, which also ran a Yamaha F225, returned 1.7 litres per mile, measured over several seasons. With the new layout the fuel consumption has gone up just a little to 2 litres per mile, again carefully logged over a period of two years. This increase is due to the extra weight in the stern making the boat just a little heavier, but in the grand scheme of things Mark is very happy with the situation, and certainly the Ribcraft suits the seas that they operate in, and gives them an edge over the traditional, wooden boats that operate sightseeing trips. If you are ever tempted to go over to the Scillies, even in your own boat, I would thoroughly recommend a trip out on Firebrand IV. You will see and learn so much that your entire stay will be enhanced.

**Simon Everett**

population of puffins. These comic parrots of the sea nest on some of the outer islands, not just in burrows, though - some of their nesting sites are pure rock. On these rocky outcrops they make a makeshift nest between the rocks. In the waters around the islands they can be seen in abundance, resting on the water between bouts of fishing and returning the catch to their nests. When they fly they are little buzz bombs, with an amazingly fast turn of speed, but it is underwater where these little birds earn their keep.

The puffins chase sand eels and other small fish to feed their chicks and themselves. The seals hunt for crabs and bigger fish around the massive kelp forests. With the ultra-clear water around the Scillies this is where Firebrand has another trick up her sleeve: to show her visitors an entirely new world, the underwater world beneath their feet. Fitted in the hull, facing down and slightly forward, is a video camera in a small housing. The

view from this camera is displayed on the Raymarine M1500 in the forward end. This allows the party to view the waving fronds of kelp lit by the sunlight streaming through the gin-clear water. The oranges, browns and golds contrast against the azure blue of the sea and sunlight. Occasionally fish can be seen swimming around the kelp fronds; at other times, when the puffins are fishing avidly or seals are diving, these can also be seen in their underwater world on the camera. It is a window on a whole new world.

In the shallow bays that are visited, Mark and Susie have a hands-on gadget for each of the passengers which also gives them a view into the water. The viewbox is a simple device but one which provides endless pleasure, especially for the schoolchildren who come on these trips as part of an educational package. The hands-on aspect of the viewbox makes things very much more tangible than the detached nature of the

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