

March Speaker's Report for 12th March 2026 talk,

Flat Holm – A Walk Through Time

Talk by Bridget Box, Chair of the Flat Holm Society, for Sully u3a, 12th March 2026

Did you know ... salmon grow large enough to swallow library books; Antigua, Gibraltar and Flat Holm have a connection; and, Flat Holm was partially responsible for inventing the original British booze cruise?

All was revealed in Bridget's richly illustrated, impeccably researched and entertaining talk. She looped around the historical timeline of the island, from the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlers in c.800 B.C. to its present-day warden Megan.

We learned until the Ice Age ended with the sea level rise, the island was a Mendip hill. Saints Baruc and Cadoc, after whom Barry is named, retreated to Flat Holm for meditation and hermitage, though Baruc drowned returning to Flat Holm to collect a book Cadoc had left. Mythical saints became real settlers. Rabbit farmers followed Vikings. Resident staff came when a Bristol Channel lighthouse was established in the 1730s. The Victorian military's Lord Palmerston built the barracks and gun defences in the 1860s for a French invasion which never came. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, the island gained considerable scientific and strategic importance, first hosting the early over water radio transmission experiments of Marconi in 1897, then the British home guard defences of World War Two.

The 20th century island is an astonishing array of statistics and numbers: 12 pairs of lesser black-backed gulls became 6,000 and are now back to 2,000. Herds of sheep have been and gone, and are back again. There were 500 human troops there during the war; now one resident warden and a handful of volunteers. One peregrine falcon has steadfastly held dominion over the island for many years, occasionally producing chicks. Several TV crews recently, including BBC's Countryfile, have filmed there. Never has so much history and interest been crammed into a 550m diameter island. There's even a Titanic connection.

As for St Cadoc's lost book, it was purportedly swallowed by a giant salmon. When caught and opened, the fish revealed the missing book. Antigua and Gibraltar have water catchments too, similar to the one on Flat Holm built by the Victorians for the men stationed there, though certain doggedly loyal tour guides on each island disagree! When the sale of alcohol was banned on Sundays in Wales, the then owner of Flat Holm obligingly opened a 'hotel' for thirsty visitors to row across and quench their thirst.

Today the island is a nature reserve managed by Cardiff Council, with several sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs), and recently stabilised heritage buildings such as the foghorn station and the cholera hospital. Visitors are now most welcome. They may

enjoy one of the island's dedicated range of beers in The Gull and Leek pub, the most southerly in Wales, and properly licensed these days!

Do visit if you can, and for more information search for The Flat Holm Society <https://flatholmsociety.org.uk>. SJW