

It is one of the most dangerous shipping hazards in the Bristol Channel, yet in 1592 somebody was mooring a boat there. Why?

THE SECRET OF SKER POINT

The handwriting of the old document was quite difficult to read - a form of longhand popular in the time of the First Queen Elizabeth but obsolete now for over two hundred years. Yet the word that caught my attention was clear enough – “Botehaven”, or in modern English, “Boat Haven”. There was also no doubt as to the location it referred to – right at the heart of one of the most dangerous navigation hazards in the Bristol Channel. Who, in their right mind, would want to keep a boat there!!!

Sker Point, then as now, is a low reef of jagged rocks jutting out from the coast at a point where the eastern shore of Swansea Bay meets the Bristol Channel. Down the centuries many fine vessels have come to grief here, often with great loss of life. Older members of our community still have vivid memories of the ‘great storm’ in April 1947 when the Liberty ship *Santampa* with 38 crew aboard was driven onto these rocks in a howling gale. The wind that night was so strong that rockets fired from the shore by the Coastguard in an effort to get a line aboard were driven back without reaching the stricken vessel. The would-be rescuers could only watch helplessly as the raging sea smashed the vessel in two; the cries of those aboard became fewer; and then eventually ceased altogether.

The Mumbles lifeboat, *Edward Prince of Wales* and her eight-man crew had been launched in an effort to effect a rescue, but the cold light of dawn revealed that little vessel upside-down on the rocks a short distance away with the bodies of her crew lying scattered all around her.



The sun rose that day in a clear sky with the sea as calm as a mill-pond. Typically of Sker the weather had gone from one extreme to the other in just a few short hours. Those who visit here on a fine summer’s day can scarcely imagine the sort of fury the elements can unleash on this rocky point yet the

proof is there for everyone to see. Scattered about the surface of the reef are great rocks and boulders, some the size of a small saloon car, which the sea has tossed up there like children's marbles. It is a dangerous and unpredictable place and certainly not one where anybody would expect someone to moor or keep a boat!

Yet that yellowed and dog-eared old document from 1592 insisted that this had been the case, and the feature which it refers to as the Botehaven allows a faint possibility that this may just have been the case. A narrow cleft or gully leads inside the rocks from the sea to a large, fan-shaped tidal pool with a beach. Known today as Pwll y Dyfan I suppose it would be possible in theory (dependant on tide and weather conditions) to navigate a ship's longboat or similar craft in and out through this feature. Again though the question arises, why use such a difficult and uncertain harbour when there are other more suitable beaches close at hand?



The seaward entrance to Pwll y Dyfan at low tide.

The immediate reason that springs to mind is that this was a location used by smugglers who are alleged to have been prevalent on the coast hereabouts. Sker Point is a lonely, bleak and isolated place of windswept fields and sand dunes in which Sker House is the only place of habitation. Viewed from the sea the entrance to Pwll y Dyfan would have been virtually invisible, and who, without local knowledge, would have thought of this notorious reef as the possible location for such activities?

If a boat moored in Pwll y Dyfan was used for such a purpose, then this cannot have been without the knowledge, and probably the active participation of, the occupants of Sker House, which in turn gives rise to another interesting possibility. Originally this house had been a grange of Neath Abbey, but shortly after the Dissolution of that monastery was acquired by the Turberville family whose principal seat was at Penlline Castle near Cowbridge.

From 1561 to about 1575 Sker was the home of the eldest son of this family, Jenkin Turberville - a violent and ruthless individual whom the authorities found it almost impossible to bring to justice. It was he who transformed the original grange into the house standing there today, and when he moved to Penlline following the death of his father, he ensured that those who occupied the house thereafter were members of his family. Jenkin was certainly the sort of person we might suspect of indulging in smuggling activities, but there is another aspect of his character which suggests that some or all of the contraband involved may have been a highly dangerous commodity indeed.



The beach at Pwll y Dyfan at low tide.

Jenkin was a Roman Catholic at a time when this was illegal and incurred heavy penalties. Many others of his family also remained loyal to the faith, and those he installed at Sker were frequently prosecuted for their adherence to "the old religion". There is also evidence that Jenkin was involved in organising the movement of Catholic priests and disseminating Roman Catholic literature in the area. In 1596 his home at Penlline Castle was raided in the belief that two Jesuit priests were being harboured there, and had they been captured Jenkin would have been liable to the death penalty. Both, however, had already left before the raid, but the investigators nevertheless seized Roman Catholic literature and writings which were sufficient for Jenkin to be hauled off to the Tower of London for questioning. Torture was routinely used as part of this procedure and it is significant that he died the following year shortly after being released.



Sker House at this time is also believed to have been a place where the Mass was celebrated and Catholic priests were offered shelter, though the only one known to have stayed here for certain was Father Phillip Evans who was arrested at the house in 1678. Could Botehaven therefore have been the means whereby Jenkin Turberville smuggled Jesuit priests and Roman Catholic literature into this country from the Continent? A clandestine operation such as that leaves few if any traces in contemporary records – particularly if it remained undetected. We are therefore in the realm of “maybe” and “perhaps”, and I advance this theory as an interesting possibility; nothing more. What is certain is that other than this single instance in 1592, I have not come across the name ‘Botehaven’ applied to that curious inlet at Pwll y Dyfan either before or since.

