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Viewpoint

Rock legends



Time: 15 mins

Region: South West England

Landscape: urban



Location:

View of the Bedruthan Steps from Carnewas, St Eval, Cornwall PL27 7UW

Grid reference:

SW 84772 68967

Keep an eye out for:

The tides - don't even think about going on the beach in bad weather

North Cornwall's coast is lined with rocky bays between craggy cliffs. For centuries it has been lashed by Atlantic storms that have wrecked ships and drowned smugglers.

Today it can be bleak, cold and even dangerous. The Bedruthan Steps are a good example; storms and fierce tides can put the bay off limits to visitors.

Yet in the summer crowds of people come here; and have done for around 200 years.

What attracts visitors to this dangerous stretch of coastline?



One reason is sheer visual drama. Look down on the five massive rocks lining the bay. These are known as the Bedruthan Steps. The name once referred to a path down the cliff but transferred over time to include the rocks.

If you are here at low tide you can see just how big they are; look for the tiny figures of people on the beaches below. At high tide meanwhile you can watch thundering Atlantic waves pounding and shaping the rocks in front of your eyes.



Look closely at the rock surfaces and you can make out horizontal bands. This is slate, which forms in layers like sheets of paper. These layers are densely packed so they break down slowly. The waves that batter the cliffs wear away the softer rocks first, leaving the slate standing in arresting gnarled stacks.

The dramatic scenery inspired a dramatic story. A legend developed that the stacks were stepping stones used by the devil or a Cornish giant called Bedruthan. The myth was encouraged to attract tourists.

The first visitors explored here for less romantic reasons. The stacks are nine miles from Newquay; when Newquay became a resort, early holidaymakers travelling to and fro stopped here to rest their horses.

Today most people visit the stacks by car - the rocks have changed too. The smallest, pointiest stack is called Queen Bess Rock as it is said to look like Queen Elizabeth I. If this isn't immediately obvious don't worry - the likeness has faded as the rock has eroded. In fact the Queen has lost her head!

Visitors come here for the heady mix of danger, intrigue and mythology. These are the result of both physical and cultural processes. So though we're at the same spot as the first tourists, we are not seeing the same view.

Profit and loss

While danger attracts tourists it has very real consequences. Right of Queen Bess Rock is Samaritan Island, named after a ship that struck it in 1846. Some locals profited from looting shipwrecks, while smugglers probably carved the steps to the beach to take advantage of fast tides and secluded coves.

The cliffs were also mined for metals including copper and lead. The clifftop café and shop are converted mine buildings. The shop was a 'count house', an office where miners were paid.