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Viewpoint

Desert island



Time: 15 mins

Region: South West England

Landscape: coastal



Location: Samson Flats, Samson, Isles of Scilly

Grid reference: SV 87940 13168

Getting there: Catch a ferry from a neighbouring island and walk the plank from the boat to the shore; or hire a kayak from Bryher and paddle across the clear blue water from Rushy Bay.

Keep an eye out for: The island is a protected wildlife area and Site of Special Scientific Interest. Terns, gannets and razorbills nest on the rocky outcrops and seals play in the waves.

Lying 28 miles off mainland Cornwall the Isles of Scilly are a scattered group of around 140 islands, of which 5 are inhabited. Samson, on the western edge of the main group, is the largest uninhabited island. It takes its name from Saint Samson of Dol, who visited the islands in the sixth century.

Nestled in the narrow strip of land between the twin hills of Samson stand the roofless remains of stone cottages and boathouses. Long walls section off parts of the island. Around the ancient burial sites that top the hills, flints, pottery and other echoes have been unearthed of an intriguing history of habitation.

But no one has lived here since the mid-nineteenth century; the buildings and former deer park have crumbled into ruins and the island lies swathed in ghostly tales.

Why did Samson's former residents disappear?



Kayaking to Samson from Bryher © Jen and Sim Benson

Two hundred years ago Samson was home to around forty people who lived and worked on the island as farmers and fishermen. A tiny island at just 0.38km², compared with the smallest currently-inhabited island, Bryher at 1.32km², life was hard and resources were scarce.

By the mid-1800s there were just two families remaining: the Webbers and the Woodcocks. All ten residents are reported to have been suffering the effects of malnutrition, surviving on what they could forage locally, predominantly potatoes and limpets.

In 1834 Augustus Smith, the London-born self-appointed Lord Proprietor of Scilly, acquired the lease of the islands from the Duchy of Cornwall. He moved into Tresco Abbey, developed the now-world-renowned Abbey Gardens, and set about reforming the lives of the islanders.

Many of his reforms seem well-intentioned, including building schools on the main islands and a new quay on St Mary's, but some of his actions were unpopular and unwelcome.

In 1855 he removed the families from Samson and rehomed them, turning the island into his private deer park. But even the deer failed to prosper and many escaped, some even attempting to swim to the neighbouring islands!

Left alone, Samson has returned to the peaceful wildness we find today, a haven for wildlife – in particular wildflowers and seabirds – and is looked after by the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust.



Neolithic necropolis

On the open summits of Samson's North and South Hill are several fascinating Neolithic burial chambers. In Britain the Neolithic period, or late Stone Age, is estimated at around 4,500 to 2,500 years BCE.

Also known as 'dolmen' these tombs consist of a single-chamber tomb, with two or more vertical megaliths on which rests a horizontal capstone. They were most likely used to bury important people, but they may also have been territorial markers and places of ritual offering. There are over 80 such entrance graves recorded on the Isles of Scilly.