

An aerial photograph of Looe Island, a small, green, rocky island with a sandy beach and a few buildings. The island is surrounded by blue water with white waves crashing against the shore. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

The Looe Island Story

An Illustrated History of St. George's Island

Mike Dunn

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Foreword

There is something alluring about any island. There is an intriguing privacy, like a glimpse of a courtyard through a street door, or the attractive inscrutability of a lady in a veil. Even on a day trip you are aware of your vulnerability if the weather turns bad or the boatman forgets to collect you. It may feel strange to be dependent on tides to control your coming and going, rather than the clock. This story helps to open the door or lift the veil for anyone wanting to know more about the island to the South West of Looe Harbour entrance.

Mike Dunn struck a rich seam when he started his research into Looe Island and its story. His book, acknowledging the help of the many other contributors, brings together a range of sources from the Charter of 1144 to Babs Atkins' 2004 legacy to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust. He tells stories of smuggling, when tobacco could be sold for more than ten times the cost in Guernsey and the southern shore provided a landing place invisible from the mainland. Little wonder that the 'free traders' took an interest in it. This book is also a practical guide to the island today, including advice against risking Trelawny's island when the gulls are bringing up their chicks.

My family owned the island for nearly 200 years. My own connection dates back to 1944 when it was uninhabited and I landed and made myself ill eating unripe gooseberries. Boys were always hungry in those wartime years. It is about 20 years since I first met the Atkins sisters and was later very touched when they asked me for help to define what sort of successor could meet their aim of 'no development at any price'. The Cornwall Wildlife Trust will keep faith with their legacy.

I am sure others will enjoy reading this book with as much interest as I have.

Sir John Trelawny





Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my wife, Jenny, for introducing me to St. George's Island, and the remarkable Atkins sisters. Jenny knew them because the late Evelyn Atkins was a school friend (and later bridesmaid) to her mother 'Tommy' Odd. 'Tommy' met Evelyn in about 1920 when travelling by train to the grammar school they attended in Surrey. They remained lifelong friends and 'Tommy' is mentioned in both Evelyn's books. Both were unusually adventurous for the era and hence the nickname 'Tommy' for a tomboy. As young women they took the then unusual step of embarking on a cruise together on the *S.S. Doric*. 'Tommy' was an instant convert but 'Attie' hated it which is ironic considering that destiny was to inextricably link her life with the sea. It was 'Tommy' who took over Evelyn's job at a coal merchant's office (affectionately known in the family at that time as the 'coal hole') in Epsom when her removal to Cornwall was imminent thus overcoming her desire not to let down the proprietor who had been kind to her.

Without the encouragement and support of 'Babs' Atkins, who kindly loaned some of her papers, including transcriptions of articles relating to Looe from the *Cornish Times* between 1857 and 1905, the project would not have been attempted. I am also grateful for the help provided by the staff of local and national archives.

Of particular value in the early stages was an introduction to local historian Carole Vivian by Ann and Paul Brumpton who run self-catering accommodation in Tremaine, near Pelynt. At short notice, Carole Vivian generously gave of her time and research information thus providing a solid foundation upon which to begin.

More recently Barbara Birchwood-Harper, Curator of the Old Guildhall Museum in Looe and archivist of the Looe Old Cornwall Society has made a very significant contribution. Her diligent research into the confusing history of Looe smuggling in particular, together with her enthusiastic support and wealth of local history knowledge, have been invaluable. Barbara would particularly like to thank Mary Philp, Jennie Widdowson,

Margaret England, Sarah Haworth, Pam Gyles and John Bailey, all descendants of the Hooper family, George Pritchard and her patient, methodical husband, Neil who has been so supportive and enthusiastic during the whole project.

Particularly helpful information has also been provided by the Royal Institution of Cornwall, Malcolm S. Dann (his ancestors engaged in smuggling) and James P. Derriman who has done much research into the history of the Looe area. My mother, Kathleen I. Dunn, has also given generously of her time and advice sifting through archive material. Mention must also be made of Wren Toms who did so much to help the sisters when they moved to the island, Attie's niece Cecily and her husband Doug Penhaligon who also helped the Atkins' sisters in the early days and more recently have supplied me with family information. Also Tony Pengelly who took over from his grandfather Leonard as supply boatman bringing mail and supplies to the island every week, weather permitting, and the Looe lifeboat crew who assisted with the interment ceremony for 'Babs' and joined some 150 friends and relatives at her memorial service at St. Martins Church, Looe in May 2004.

I am especially grateful to Gus and Sheila Ravine without whom 'Babs' Atkins would have been alone and vulnerable on the island following the death of her sister. They have enthusiastically embraced island life since becoming resident in Smuggler's Cottage, maintained the services and added the boon of Internet communication. Without them, completing this work would have been extremely difficult. For the Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Callum Deveney, Reserve Manager has been very supportive and Tony Stebbings delivered a wonderful eulogy at the memorial service for Babs and reassured everyone that the island is in safe hands. Dr Colin Smithers, great nephew to the sisters, has also welcomed this project.

Special thanks are also due to Sir John Trelawny who has always taken a close interest in the island and kindly introduced me to the publisher of this work. He will be maintaining close contact with the Cornwall Wildlife Trust concerning the future of the island. Last, but by no means least, I should like to record my gratitude to Dave Gardner, the recently deceased and greatly missed Looe boatman, for his cheerful willingness to take us to the island whenever conditions permitted.

Mike Dunn
January 2005

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Island House, Volunteer's Hut and Jetty Cottage

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

What is it that so fascinates us about islands? If it be romantic stories of smuggling, buried treasure and adventure then St. George's (or Looe Island [1] as it is more commonly known) can boast all three as we shall see. There is also the sense of remoteness and whilst the island is only a short distance off Hannafore Point to the west of Looe it is frequently cut-off, sometimes for long periods, by adverse sea conditions. On more than one occasion Christmas mail and 'good cheer' was delivered by 'Father Christmas' in a helicopter, courtesy of the local media, after a long period of isolation!

Between the mainland and Looe Island there are rocks the highest of which is referred to as Midmain or Magman according to Gilbert's *The Parochial History of Cornwall*, Vol. IV, published in 1838. Traditionally, it is possible to walk to the mainland at Hannafore with dry feet on Good Friday when the sea recedes due to big spring tides but these days it is rarely possible and slippery seaweed makes the trip hazardous.

Most unusually, and perhaps uniquely, the foreshore (area between the mean high and low water marks) is not owned by the Crown and is therefore private property, a fact recorded in the deeds. According to a previous owner of the island this came about in 1873 when the then Prince of Wales (later to become Edward VII) sold the rights to settle a gambling debt!

The magical ambiance that many feel when they step ashore on St. George's helped the musician Andrew Hugill with his compositions and eventually led to him writing *Island Symphony*, copies of which are for sale on CD in Jetty Cottage at the time of writing.

As visitors will quickly discover, it is a stiff climb to the summit of the island but the effort is rewarded by delightful glimpses of the sea, attractive scenery and finally a panoramic view. The seat at the beginning of the climb is an ideal spot for a picnic and looks out over Little Island (now re-named Trelawny's Island) that can be accessed by a small bridge, providing the seagulls are not nesting.

St. George's covers an area of some 22.5 acres, has a circumference of about one mile, and is 150 feet high at the summit. Geologically the rocks in this area are sedimentary i.e. they were laid down in primeval lakes and seas during the Devonian period some 350 million years ago. This pre-dates the Carboniferous period that gave rise to today's coal seams in some parts of the country. There is fresh water from a spring below Smuggler's Cottage and after the drought of 1976 it was noted that it took five weeks for the first rains to filter through to it. Because of the maritime climate St. George's rarely experiences frost or snow and, perhaps uniquely amongst English off shore islands, it is now wooded on the lee side resulting in an attractive and varied habitat for wildlife. On a balmy summer day the atmosphere and views as you ascend to the summit have an almost Mediterranean feel. The mild climate is ideal for horticulture and early daffodils were once grown here for the London markets.

In 1964 the island was purchased by the Atkins sisters from Epsom (see chapter 2) in unusual circumstances. As readers of the two books Evelyn Atkins wrote about their experiences will soon discover, island life is not for the faint hearted. During winter gales mountainous seas pound the rocks sending spray and foam right over Island House. In 1974 a storm coincided with the highest tides for 300 years. On the morning of the high tide, huge seas crashed down on top of the cliffs near Island House but without significant damage. By the following morning, however, the storm had become even more violent and overnight had washed away a large Victorian boathouse behind the beach plus adjacent boats secured to the trees and a barge measuring 25ft by 12ft used for transporting heavy goods. Then the Great Storm of 1987 caused a cliff fall that wrecked the freshwater pumping system and another violent storm in 1989 washed away much of the track up from the beach (now replaced by a concrete ramp). The great storm of October 1987 was by no means the worst to hit the south. In November 1703 winds, in what has become known as the 'Great British Storm', are estimated to have reached 120mph. The newly constructed Eddystone light was destroyed, over 1000 Royal Navy seamen were killed in the Channel and the total loss of life has been estimated at 8000. For anyone on the island at the time it must have been awe-inspiring.

On a small island storms are dramatic, but potentially much more dangerous is fire and visitors are urged to exercise extreme caution. On the one occasion that a clearance bonfire got out of control, Looe firemen came to the rescue by boat. Had sea conditions prevented a landing however, the situation could have become serious.

To assist with the upkeep of the island the Atkins sisters were always dependent upon volunteers and also introduced working holidays for young people, sometimes in pursuit of a Duke of Edinburgh award.

[1] Looe derives from the Cornish 'Logh' meaning sea-lake or estuary. The boating pool in Looe once powered a tide mill



*Looe Island in
(below) today*



1890 (above) and

Chapter 2

THE ATKINS SISTERS

Any introduction to the island would be incomplete without a reference to the remarkable Atkins sisters, Evelyn and Roselyn Alice, better known as 'Attie' and 'Babs', who became the owners in rather unusual circumstances in 1964 after moving to Nos. 1 and 2 Bassett Court, West Looe. The then owner, who was forced to leave through ill health, was so keen to avoid the island being developed as a holiday camp or similar that he granted the sisters a private mortgage, knowing it would be safe in their hands. The asking price, incidentally, was £22,000!

Both were remarkable ladies from Epsom in Surrey. From an early age 'Attie' had an ambition to be an author and was widely read. Prophetically, she also had an ambition from an early age to own an island! As a young woman her interests included the piano, mountaineering, cricket, cycling, hockey, tennis, photography, amateur dramatics and reading. She was a 'Master shot' with a rifle and represented Surrey at the famous Bisley range. Her photographs were used on the covers of a number of magazines and for postcards of Looe.

During WWII 'Attie' became a part time land girl and then joined the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) where, as an officer, she was in charge of between 50 and 100 Wrens at different times. During this period 'Attie' visited the highly secret tunnels under Dover Castle (now open to the public) and even persuaded the crew of a Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) to let her drive it round Dover Harbour! Her working life was mostly spent with ICI.



Evelyn 'Attie' Atkins

Even those who knew 'Attie' really well may be surprised that to her school friends she was known as 'Pins'. The author's mother-in-law Honora Odd was 'Attie's' lifelong friend. They met age eleven on their first day at grammar school in Wallington, Surrey. The girls were soon using nicknames and Honora, being a tomboy, became 'Tommy' and 'Evelyn became 'Pins', a tease on Atkins to Hat-pins becoming 'Pins'.

In their early twenties these adventurous young women went on a cruise on the *S.S. Doric*. 'Tommy' loved the experience but 'Attie' quickly realised that she disliked cruising which is ironic considering that thirty years later destiny was to inextricably link her life with the sea. When 'Tommy' married in 1937 'Attie' was her bridesmaid and years later it was 'Tommy' who took over 'Attie's' clerical job in a coal merchant's office in Epsom. Thus 'Attie' knew the job was in good hands and she could leave Epsom and move to her dream island with a clear conscience, a degree of loyalty to her employer that might surprise people today.



'Babs' Atkins

'Babs', the younger sister, was the quieter of the two but equally determined and included in her leisure interests wood carving, gardening, bee keeping, stone polishing, crafts, cooking and wine making. Amongst the possessions taken to the island by small boat when they moved there were 40 gallons of home made wine! Friends and family visiting the sisters became familiar with their homemade elderflower 'champagne' which was produced with much ceremony to celebrate their arrival on the island. A recipe for this refreshing drink appears in Appendix 4. Her career was in teaching and she became a deputy head of a large school in Surrey before moving to Cornwall where she was Senior Mistress at Looe Secondary School until she retired.

The sisters had two elder brothers, William Charles Ralph Atkins and Trevor Cooper Atkins who sadly died within a few months of each other in 1937/38.

'Attie' died in 1997 and is buried in the cemetery at West Looe although it is hoped that she may one day be transferred to her beloved island. 'Babs' died in 2004 (she is buried on the island) but the story of these two remarkable sisters buying the island lives on in 'Attie's' book *We Bought An Island* which provides a highly entertaining account of them fulfilling a dream against all the odds. It won them friends all over the World and a large postbag to be answered, especially after a period of enforced isolation. Who else sends letters in envelopes stamped 'Delayed by Gales'?!

With hectic lifestyles as a result of wide ranging interests and the intervention of WWII the sisters never found time for marriage although as young women they enjoyed dances and parties. Amongst 'Attie's' ' papers a light hearted hand written agreement with a friend makes it clear that marriage was not a high priority:-

“We, the undersigned, hereby declare that should Evelyn Atkins be so unwise as to marry she shall dispatch a German Sausage on her wedding day to Ethel Hook, should she be living at that time. If on the other hand Evelyn Atkins does not marry (the age limit being 35 yrs of age) Ethel Hook (subject to her being alive) shall give Evelyn Atkins a bag of doughnuts on her 35th birthday”

History does not record if the doughnuts were ever delivered!!

Evelyn's second book, *Tales From Our Cornish Island* is an entertaining account of the many adventures and problems the sisters faced once established as residents. Both books are available in an omnibus edition that, at the time of writing, can be purchased in Jetty Cottage.

The sisters were also remarkable for their love affair with gadgets, mostly acquired by mail-order. Unfortunately, the salt laden atmosphere did not always treat these kindly and many had a short life before being consigned to the attic, disposal being too difficult on an island. When the electricity supply fails (the island has no mains supply) there is no option but to go down the track to the generator shed, regardless of the weather, and the sisters became adept at revitalising this fickle machine, sometimes with a few well-aimed blows with a wrench!

All supplies, of course (including oil for the generator), have to be manhandled from the delivery boat. The problems do not always end there. A ton of coal, unloaded on to the jetty in half hundred-weight sacks, was swept away overnight by a south easterly gale and beach combing became a regular occupation for sometime afterwards to retrieve as much of the precious fuel as possible! On another occasion, when 'Attie' was living alone on the island whilst 'Babs' continued her teaching career, she had to drag 21 one hundredweight sacks of coal from the beach to Island House, before they were threatened by the next high tide.

It was whilst Babs was still working as a teacher on the mainland that sea conditions prevented her visiting her sister on the island from Christmas to Easter!

To better understand the challenge the sisters faced in those early days it is interesting to note that they had no telephone or radio phone for communication with the mainland. During school term time 'Babs' lived in Bassett Court, West Looe all week and could only communicate with 'Attie' by waving or, in the winter, flashing a light from Hannafore Point. In an emergency passing fishing boats could be hailed with a venerable whale hide megaphone but it was many years before they obtained a radio-telephone. Now, with the advent of mobile telephones, the island even has the luxury of Internet communication.

A boatman has a contract to deliver mail when conditions permit and will throw it ashore if the sea is too rough to permit a landing.



Island House

That the Atkins sisters were very special and self-sufficient is evident which is perhaps not surprising when one considers their father, William John Edwin Atkins. When only 13, he ran away to sea in the age of sail and rounded Cape Horn, enduring the hazards of manning the yardarms in mountainous seas. After formal training as a seaman his taste for adventure took him to America where he hoboed across the continent, clinging to trains, and even took a job as a cowboy; it seems that adventure was in the Atkins genes!

In 2000, despite very substantial cash offers, 'Babs' ensured the continued conservation of the island by bequeathing it to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust, a selfless act that her sister 'Attie' would have applauded.

The Trust began to take control in 2004, following the death of 'Babs', and quickly began opening new paths and restoring some of the buildings. When funds allow they hope to turn the main building, Island House, into a wildlife centre to be called the Atkins Observatory. Amongst the possessions the Atkins sisters left in the house

was a 19th century American-made organ they purchased many years ago from an antique dealer in Looe. It was originally used in Talland church but became redundant when an electrically driven instrument was installed. As Talland church shares with the island links with smuggling and Glastonbury it seems fitting that it came here.



Tommy Odd (left) with 'Attie' (centre) and 'Babs'.



Tommy Odd and 'Attie' with the author (right).