



# Shell Island

## Amphibious Mail



Shell Island lies on the West coast of Wales on the Cardigan Bay coast, between Harlech to the north and Barmouth to the south. The island is a popular place for campers, in spring and summer, for those under canvas at least, as those who have 'dragged sheds' are not allowed. In fact, it was only briefly an island within recent history. The 'island' is a sand bar at the mouth of the River Arthro and originally could be reached from the north. This isthmus was breached by the sea in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the gap artificially widened to provide easy access to a sheltered anchorage. The southern mouth of the river soon silted up and the island became rejoined to the mainland. However, at high tide the causeway linking it to the main road is flooded and you will get more than wet feet crossing the marshy land to the south. You could also find your way blocked by an RAF establishment where I believe they build and test pilot-less drone planes (so no chance of a shortcut to the main road that way).

The island was originally called Mochras and still is by the locals. 'Moch' is Welsh for pigs, while the only meaning I can find for 'ras' is the transliteration for 'race'. If they indeed had pig races here I can find no information about this, yet alone who won.

Because of its tidal isolation a private mail service operates when the causeway is covered by sea, for those who may have missed the last post or suddenly remembered to send a postcard to the boss / wife / Aunt Harriett etc, but the tide

is just coming in and tomorrow will be too late. In fact a postcard home is one of the more exciting activities here when it starts to rain. Mail is transported by one of those ex-Army WW2 DUKWs, so popular these days, for an extra cost (currently 50p per item). A label is fixed to the letter or postcard in addition to the regular postage rate. As camping is restricted to the spring till early autumn the postal service is also only seasonal.

There have been at least three stamp designs over the years.

The first issue was a 25p bilingual stamp, unsurprisingly and unoriginally depicting a shell, but in a rather fetching sandy colour. These date to 1999-2003. They were



The view across to Shell Island

printed locally and are roulette perforated. There is debate within philatelic circles as to whether this stamp is a diamond or a square stamp. This is important in order for it to be corrected mounted in an album. Balance of opinion is in favour of a diamond, while the collector is free to mount them in the English or Welsh orientation. A look at the special cover produced for the inauguration solves this question. A print run of 3,500 stamps lasted well beyond their postal validity.

The postal service was launched with an off-shore posting of limited edition commemorative covers. Shell Island has links to the mysterious land of Cantre'r Gwaelod in Cardigan Bay, featured in issue 2 of this series. Sarn Padrig, a ridge of boulders and mud, runs directly out to sea for over 12 miles from here. At low tide it is possible to stroll along this ridge 4 miles out to sea. This and other sarns are said to be the dykes that protected the ancient drowned land from the waves. A replica post box was set up on the sarn for this stunt. Consequently the covers bear appropriate cachets for mail posted in Cantre'r Gwaelod.

The second issue was a 30p stamp of the same design in a pale purple shade. The eagle-eyed of you will notice that these are slightly larger than the earlier stamp. It is said that the postmaster at the time, Iwan Lewis, was getting on a bit in years, so these presented a larger target for him to cancel. These stamps ran from 2004-2007. 5,250 were printed in sheets of 25. Look out for the reversed shell error. This was caused by a grommet knurl on the print press being over-tightened. Those of you who have used the Forsythe & Co Titan Press will know what I mean.

The current issue features the Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) which can be found flowering in the dunes amid the marram grass in late June. There is an English and a Welsh version of this 50p stamp, and they appear in pairs on the sheets. The postcards are posted into a bag in the shop and the Shell Island stamp is cancelled with a duck frank, before transportation to the postbox in the small nearby village of Llanbedr. A flag is flown from the island shop 30 minutes before the DUKW sets off in case there is any last minute mail. These orchid stamps were first issued in 2008, so expect a new tariff for the service soon.

Some other stamps of a similar design are also found. These are, interestingly, inscribed Ynys Crogen on the Welsh stamp. This is a literal translation of Shell Island, but is not a name in usage verbally or on maps, or indeed on the Island's publicity. It is most likely that these represent a test print or printer's trial, but that it was decided to keep the Welsh as Mochras at a late stage of preparation.

However there are earlier stamps which are a bit of a mystery and predate the renaming to Shell Island from Mochras. They depict a map of the island, when it was an island, and appear to be drawn from a large scale OS map of 1865. The postal service was unlikely to have been in use that early, but there seems to be no record of one existing in living memory apart from a mention of such a post in a local newspaper report in 1932, though the location and a description on the stamps was missing. Certainly, before camping there became popular there would have been little use for a local post service. It is possible that this is a bogus issue, but if a used cover ever came to light it may reveal a lot more about this local post.