

# Sully Island Post



Sully Island lies on the south coast of Wales, approximately half way between Cardiff and Barry, opposite the hamlet of Swanbridge. It is small, only about 500 yards east to west and 100 yards north to south, and is currently uninhabited [there are fields on the mainland oppose that are more than twice that size]. This was not always the case, for despite its size it has quite a history, Actually it is not a fully fledged island as it is linked to the mainland at the lowest tides. This doesn't mean that Sully is easy to visit. When linked there is a very short window in which you can return, and the tide there is notoriously fast and treacherous. These tides exceed 10 metres and are claimed to be the second highest in the world, with undercurrents and eddies on the landward side.

The local post ran from 1967 until 1970. Stamps could be bought at The Captain's Wife pub in Swanbridge, or the shops that catered for those in the local Island View camping site. You'd write your postcards to friends back home, put on a regular Royal Mail stamp, and a Sully Island stamp, wait for low tide and hurry across. Just for fun the posting box was placed at the eastern tip of the island, the furthest point from the causeway. So if you dallied awhile you'd get wet feet crossing back or be stranded until the next low tide. It was a local joke that those stranded there might as well post an SOS on a postcard while they were there, as no local would go out to rescue them. The postcards were collected by the 'postmaster' at high tide who cheated by using a motor boat to get across. The cards were then taken to the local post office for sending on.

The stamps tell some of the history of Sully Island. All known examples are valued 2 old pence. They were issued successively in three pairs, in three different colours.

One stamp shows the ship (or Cogg) of Alfredo de Marisco, a 13<sup>th</sup> century pirate who terrorised the trading ships of the Bristol Channel. He is probably related to the de Mariscos of Lundy who lived there around the same time and have the Marisco Tavern named after the family. Alfredo made Sully his base of operations. He operated under the title Nighthawk and had the image of a hawk's skull on his ship's mainsail. Could this be the origin of the skull and crossbones of later pirates?

A pair of stamps show an old map of Sully, possibly from the time of de Marisco. It shows fortifications at the eastern tip, overlooking the Bristol Channel, and what may be a pier on the sheltered mainland side. There is a suggestion that Sully was not linked by a causeway then. Near the fort is a crossed swords symbol. Some claim this marks the spot where de Marisco single-handedly fought and defeated a group of blood thirsty mercenaries

hired by the traders of Bristol. But others reckon that it is an X to mark the spot where the pirate treasure is buried. Metal detectorists are frequently seen there carefully digging up discarded drinks cans and other rubbish.

The counterpart to the pirate stamp records Sully as a smuggling base in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. If you think you are hard done by with tax, spare a thought for your forefathers. Smuggling then wasn't booze and tobacco products. Anything and everything might be landed ashore at the dead of night to escape taxation. Cereals, cloth, sheep or pottery might be unloaded on moonless nights. The most unusual cargo landed there was mice. None of the smugglers had any sort of explanation as to why they were smuggling mice, and were executed the next morning. The low rise nearest the causeway is still known as Gallows Hill.

The final pair of stamps records the island's connection with the Antarctic Survey Ship SY Scotia. This yacht spent the early years of the twentieth century mapping the coastline of Antarctica and South Orkney Islands. It also appears on a less well known stamp issued by the British Antarctic Territory. However during WWI the Scotia had been reduced to use as a freighter. In 1916 though, a fire on board caused the Scotia to be beached on Sully where the waves and tide quickly took their toll, and the ship was looted by the locals for its coal. One stamp shows the Scotia in full sail, while the other shows the remains of a wooden ships keel on the beach on the leeward side of Sully. Though some claim this is too small to be the Scotia we know better, don't we. If you look on GoogleEarth you can see the remains of the wreck. It's true - look!

The local post came to an end, not as some claim because they had several thousand 2d stamps printed and decimalisation of £sd was approaching. They could have simply overprinted them 2p or something. The truth was because of an unfortunate freak incident involving the postmaster, his lantern, a grappling hook and a stray giant squid. This was covered up because the authorities would never believe the truth.

If you ever wanted to own your own island, then Sully offered you this chance recently. How much would you pay for one whose history could be a backdrop for small scale Pirates of the Caribbean, Jamaica Inn, The Poseidon Adventure and Whiskey Galore? The asking price of £1.3 million was never reached, and it was eventually sold for the knockdown bargain price of £90,000. Perhaps it was the fact that it is a nature reserve, you couldn't erect anything more permanent than a bivouac, there is no running water (piped or natural), and most of all no sanitation that put buyers off. The rainy season lasting 51 weeks of the year was also a disincentive.