

# Gigha

Last updated January 15<sup>th</sup> 2024



Gigha<sup>1</sup> really is a rather lovely small island, about six-and-a-half miles long by one-and-a-half wide. Farms, wee beaches, four wind turbines, people who smile and wave, and the ferry chugging to and from the Kintyre mainland. In 2002 it famously distinguished itself by a successful community buy-out (at £4 million), putting an end to a series of more or less unsatisfactory recent lairds. But there had been one laird who was loved and who gave the island its crowning glory — the Achamore gardens<sup>2</sup>: Lieutenant Colonel Sir James Nockells Horlick of the Coldstream Guards whose simple gravestone in Kilchattan burial ground has the memorable epitaph from Isaiah *"They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks"*. Since the island has been managed by the Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust<sup>3</sup> the population has increased to more than 150. But I fear some of the new housing is not very inspiring. But at least houses are being built to accommodate the increasing population.

There are a lot of anchorages for the size of the island, so one of them is sure to suit the wind conditions. Approaching the island from the east these days is a whole lot easier than in 1896 when Cowper lamented that *"There is absolutely not one single perch, beacon, or buoy, in the whole of this nine miles Sound"*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gigha.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.visitgigha.co.uk/Achamore-Gardens>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/isleofgighaheritagetrust/>

<sup>4</sup> Frank Cowper, *Sailing Tours: the yachtsman's guide to the cruising waters of the English and adjacent coasts. Part V. The west coasts of Scotland, the Orkneys and the west coast of the North Sea.* Upcott Gill, London.1896. There is more here than just sailing directions, but little information about what there was ashore, and he did not much describe many human interactions. But his descriptions of sailing with no engine in strong tidal streams are pretty hair raising, particularly bearing in mind he was often single-handed. A lot of the pilotage information could be used today. His obituarist in *Yachting Monthly* wrote in 1930: *"From his earliest days Mr. Cowper took cruising to heart and probably did more to popularize this particular way of life than any man of his day. It is almost inconceivable to us now the prejudice which then existed in the public mind against the man who did not employ hands aboard his yacht. But it was through this veteran singlehanded sailor's adventures and writings that the public began to recognize small yacht cruising as a sane man's pastime"*.

## Ardminish Bay

Most people who have heard of Gigha know about the gardens<sup>5</sup> at Achamore House, rebuilt in the late 19th century on the site of an older house, and again in about 1900 after a fire destroyed the top storey. In 2014 it was for sale, £900,000. By 2019 the price had dropped to £750 000, it was sold, and is now a rather nice-looking B&B establishment. It is about 20 minutes walk from the anchorage — and very well worth the effort. The house is in effect a side show to the beautiful gardens which are now owned by the Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust<sup>6</sup>. They are set amongst mature trees from all over the world to provide the very necessary windbreak from the salt-laden air of the Atlantic gales. In fact the trees were planted in the early 20th century to provide not a windbreak for plants, but cover for game. Later, in 1944, Sir James Horlick bought the island and, helped by Kitty Lloyd Jones, started planting the hundreds of azaleas and rhododendrons which make the spring and early summer one of the best times to visit. Later, the herbaceous borders and flowering shrubs of the delightful walled garden come into their own. And after that the glorious autumn colours. The whole place is now much better looked after — despite funding problems, and the need for volunteer weeders (at its height Horlick employed up to 10 gardeners). The attractions are signposted with nice touches like the secret passage amongst the bamboos in the walled garden, and notices inviting you to walk on the grass, stroke the pine needles, and touch and sniff the flowers. Perhaps these gardens cannot really compare with Inverewe but nonetheless they are a delight to wander around and sit in, particularly if you are looking for some stable dry land after a rough passage.

Just up the track from the entrance to the gardens you will find the 13th century remains of Kilchattan (St Cathan's) chapel and burial ground, well looked after and restored in 2010<sup>7</sup>. The east gable is complete and has a fine tall window, originally with a pointed arch but now round-headed. There are mouldering medieval graveslabs with carvings which are mostly difficult to make out, as well as modern gravestones, including James Horlick's who died in 1972. A hundred yards further along, and up the rise to the right, is the rather dull but famous 7th century Ogham stone<sup>8</sup>, apparently with an inscription (invisible to me, and certainly incomprehensible even if I could read it as it is written in an ancient linear script, which originated in Ireland, without the use of vowels). The script is named after Ogma, an Irish monk, and was used by monks and scholars for writing secret messages<sup>9</sup>.

Walking back from the gardens to the anchorage you can pause at the late 18th century (with a late 20th century extension) Gigha Hotel<sup>10</sup> for whatever liquid or solid refreshment seems just right for the moment (ph 01583 505254). However it closed in 2023 and the community are trying reopen it. Then a bit further on call in on the Gallery<sup>11</sup> to see what they are showing while the kids dabble in paint or nip up to the small play park. Next door the Wee Isle café<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.visitgigha.co.uk/Achamore-Gardens>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/isleofgighaheritagetrust/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38518/gigha-st-cathans-church-and-kilchattan-burial-ground>

<sup>8</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38529/gigha-cnoc-na-carraigh>

<sup>9</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ogham>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gigha.org.uk/Gigha-Hotel>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/gighagallery/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.visitgigha.co.uk/Wee-Isle-Caf%C3%A9>

does good ice creams, coffee, burgers and so on. And drop in to GNS (Gigha's Natural Skincare) for potions and creams.

The 'modern' church opposite the shop is worth a look. It was built in the 1920s. Apparently the minister at the time had been an architect and designed it himself. It seems very large for the population but is well kept and there is some good stained glass. The font is medieval, taken from Kilchattan chapel. Carry on north for 20 minutes, lugging your clubs, if you want a game of golf<sup>13</sup>.

Certainly the anchorage is a very handy place to regroup and gather strength, either just before or just after rounding the Mull of Kintyre. There is a 24-hour washing machine and drier with showers and toilets right by the pontoons, plus the Boathouse restaurant<sup>14</sup> which has a very good reputation for snacks, lunch and dinner (ph 01583 505123). There are also mooring buoys for visitors, and the shop is just up the road (but no decent marmalade when I was last there). And bikes for hire.

There are some tiny sandy beaches by the anchorage where children can be safely left to paddle, and the more adventurous can launch their windsurfers.

### **Caolas Gialum (South Pier)**

Apart from looking at Faith, Hope and Charity, the original three wind turbines which were bought second hand in 2004, and since 2013 at Harmony the fourth one too — all of which I find rather attractive and decidedly more pleasing than looking at a coal mine or nuclear power station — there is nothing very special to do or see. But you could walk<sup>15</sup> up to the turbines for the rather grand view, and even to hug them if you are so inclined. They have now paid for themselves and, by feeding in to the national grid, are a considerable source of income for the community. Bear in mind that electricity only came to Gigha in 1955, and yet now the island exports electricity from its community-owned wind-farm to the national grid — progress indeed, both technological and social. Although the electricity on the island has to come from the National Grid not the turbines. On a ridge just to their north you will find two very small standing stones — Bodach and Cailleach<sup>16</sup>, meaning the old man and old woman — with a fine view of Jura and the distant coast of Ireland.

### **Cuddyport**

In the right wind conditions this is a lovely spot. It is quiet, there are a couple of small beaches, at least at low tide, and you can easily walk up to Achamore gardens<sup>17</sup> pausing to admire the very pretty garden of the first cottage you come to. There is a bird hide so presumably this is a very birdy sort of a place.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://visitgigha.co.uk/Golf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://boathouseongigha.com>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/argyll/gigha-south-end.shtml>

<sup>16</sup> <https://megalithix.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/bodach-cailleach-gigha/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.visitgigha.co.uk/Achamore-Gardens>

## **Druimyeon Bay**

It may be a good anchorage in westerly weather but it is too far to row to the shore, so I never have. There is not much to see ashore anyway.

## **East Tarbert Bay**

This is a less crowded alternative to Ardminish Bay in westerly weather. It is surrounded by farmland and just up on the road you will find the best standing stone hereabouts — the so-called giant's tooth (the aforesaid fellow lived on Kintyre and got such bad toothache that he pulled out the offending tooth and hurled it over to Gigha! Or was it a pebble from his shoe, or the shoe itself? The stories vary). Another tradition is that it is actually the 'Hanging Stone' where criminals were executed.

## **Eilean Garbh (and West Tarbert Bay)**

Now here is a great anchorage, sheltered from the north if you anchor in the south bay, and from the south if you anchor in the north bay. Both bays have delightful sandy beaches but they can get crowded with bathers and wild campers. It is also worth scrambling up to the top of the 'island' for the views from Ireland to Islay to Jura and up the sound of Jura to Kintyre with the mountains of Arran beyond, and to watch the CalMac ferry ploughing its way from West Loch Tarbert to Islay, rather close it seems to the rocks off the north end of Gigha.

## **Port Mòr**

Sheltered from the southwest but there is little to see or do ashore apart from walk to the Eilean Garbh beach. Better to head round to that anchorage directly (unless it is very crowded which is unlikely). Also there is a quite well-used carpark nearby which rather detracts from the peace and quiet.