

SWANSEA BAY

If you stand at Mumbles when the tide's in, with perhaps a rowing team slicing over the bay's glassy surface and a dozen mute swans tacking and preening on the almost imperceptible swell, you could think yourself on the edge of a lake in Switzerland, there being no sign in this apparently land-bound scene of any egress to the Severn Sea.

tide in, skiers out
– dollar signs carved
from shore to shore

You have to move a kilometre or so towards town before the open-armed crescent of Swansea Bay declares itself wide to the oceans of the world.

The English poet Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864), recalling in later life the view at the end of the eighteenth century, famously declared, "The gulf of Salerno, I hear, is much finer than Naples; but give me Swansea for scenery and climate"; he found it "the most beautiful coast in the universe." The occasional palm tree may indeed lend the bay a Mediterranean ambience, but it can also have its darker moods, as when Siberian winds turn the sea's edge to a rubble of ice, or when, twice daily, the tide, falling by nearly ten metres, exposes a vast expanse of oleaginous mud (the Glamorgan-Gwent coast's tidal reach being second only to that of the Bay of Fundy in Canada, thanks to the classic funnel shape of the Severn Sea). I've heard it rumoured in Mumbles that students hoping to take a short cut to the university across the low-tide quagmire have never been seen again.

If the bay has delivered prosperity to Swansea, it has also at times threatened it with invasion. The keels of Viking marauders would have scrunched ashore here, as Sweyn (if he existed) eyed up the river mouth for the settlement of the 'ey' that is believed to have borne his name, and the alien ships of the Normans would not have been too many decades behind them. A feared French invasion during the Napoleonic Wars led to Mumbles Head being equipped with four eighteen-pounders; the lighthouse island was further fortified in the 1860s. During the Second World War, the bay was ringed with what was hoped would be an impenetrable barrage of eight-tonne concrete blocks. A pillbox from that time, up to its eye-holes in sand, can still be seen at the foot of the dunes between the

university and Blackpill.

That German visitation never came, but the sea itself might prove a devastating invader before long. Climate-change experts have predicted that a rise in sea level of about one metre over the next 100 years will render low-lying cities such as Swansea uninhabitable well before the end of the present century. And they are not alone: on walls and garage doors all over



Swansea in 2006 there appeared a chalk line, with the caption 'sea level in 2059' (and other dates for other locations). Such dangers are foreseeable. Less predictable and more immediately cataclysmic would be a tsunami – a word not known to the Welsh when, in 1607, both shores of the Severn Sea were devastated by what an eye-witness described as "mighty hilles of water tumbling over one another ... as if the greatest mountains in the world had overwhelmed the low villages ... Sometimes it dazzled many of the spectators that they imagined it had bin some fogge or mist coming with great swiftness towards them." This would accord with descriptions of the Indian Ocean tsunami of Boxing Day, 2004, although it is only since 2002 that scientists have considered it likely that the great 'flood' of 1607 – which killed at least 2,000 people and drove almost six kilometres inland in Monmouthshire – was in fact a tsunami, triggered perhaps by a submarine landslide south of Ireland.

It was the greatest environmental disaster in British history. The damage in Cardiff was extensive. What happened in Swansea is little attested, although the tsunami – whose effects were felt as far north as Cardigan – must have had an impact. It certainly seems to have made its mark east of the river in the hamlet of St Thomas, where it swept away most of the ancient and historic chapel of St Thomas the Martyr¹.

Could there be another tsunami here? Yes, according to tsunami expert Professor Mike Disney of Cardiff University. "There is no need to panic," he has written, "but in low-lying cities ... the risk is not negligible." A tsunami of 1607 dimensions could sweep away half a million souls in this more densely populated age. So if, one day, you hear that half of the island of La Palma has slipped at last into the

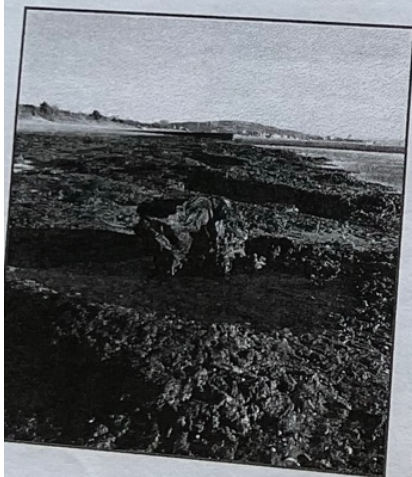
Atlantic or that a large meteorite has hit the ocean, and it looks as if Swansea Bay is about to pay the city the most intimate of visits, you are advised by Professor Disney not to jump into your car and take to the roads (which would quickly become traffic jams to drown in), but simply to take to the nearest high ground (or a multi-storey car-park). A stout sea wall is recommended as a longer-term precaution, but this Swansea has only here and there.

That the bay offers Swansea so yielding to penetration is explained by the relative softness of the underlying Coal Measures and the Millstone Grit shales.

Branches of coal
spread out beneath us,

a language of the sun,
locked
by the ancient trees in their cells,
and translated again
by the green sun
that goes whispering
through sinew and bone.

Running in parallel across the neck of peninsular Gower and out under the bay, these rocks were more easily eroded by ice and water than the comparatively resistant Pennant sandstone and limestone which flank them north and south, constituting the more elevated parts of Swansea. What is now Swansea Bay was dense with vegeta-



tion from soon after the thaw began towards the end of the last ice age until nearly 9,000 years ago, when the sea broke in, covering the fertile river plain that stretched from here to Devon. The black and waterlogged remains of those ancient trees – stumpy trunks, branches, root systems – can be seen on the foreshore at Blackpill and near the Vivian stream outfall pipe in front of the university. Elsewhere on

the beach, fisherman digging for bait often find their spades striking bits of Stone Age woodland. Boreholes out in the bay have reached peat as deep as 20m, evidence that in the late glacial period plants grew in Swansea Bay some 20m below the present sea-level.

Various local traditions suggest that the present bounds of Swansea Bay were established much more recently than the end of the last ice age. There's the folk memory of a bridle path used by the lords of Gower, connecting Penrice with Margam, which hugged the coast until it reached Mumbles Head, where it cut across what is now the bay toward the woods at Margam. It's thought to have been swept away by the 'flood' of 1607, as was Grove Island, with its farm (belonging to the Angel family), which was situated off Mumbles Head in the region of what is known to sailors to this day as the Green Grounds. In 1885, there was dragged up on the Green Grounds a slab of chiselled stone, with cement attached, which was believed to have come from the old farmhouse. There are, by now, no Angels left in Mumbles, but there are still locally-born people who remember the family's name and that spectral farm beneath the sea.

For over a century, until 1999's inauguration of the new sewage treatment plant, the Green Grounds might have been more accurately described as the Brown Grounds. Twice a day, on the flood tide, the raw sewage of the entire population of Swansea was pumped into the bay from an outfall off Mumbles Head – the third largest in Wales. I was on board the paddle-steamer *Waverley* when, rounding the head after an evening's cruise, we found ourselves afloat on a stinking brown swell of sewage blooming up from the pipe beneath us. For years, the used condoms on local beaches outnumbered the jellyfish, although things improved a little in the 1980s when Neil Kinnock opened a screening and mashing plant at Mumbles: you'd still be swimming in sewage at Langland and Caswell, but at least, now, there'd be less of a frisson of recognition. It was at about this time that notices warning people not to eat shellfish from the bay suddenly disappeared – presumably to avoid scaring off visitors. Although sewage continues to be pumped into the bay from Neath and Port Talbot, and there seems to be no way of cleansing the bay of industrial-era contaminants such as zinc and cadmium, there has been a radical improvement in water quality since Swansea stopped pumping its sewage into the sea. In a seafront restaurant, I recently enjoyed a plateful of the largest and most succulent mussels I have ever tasted, and asked where they were from. "Out there," said the waitress, gesturing towards the bay, where at that moment the

red-hulled *Swansea Bay*, one of the visual delights of a high blue tide, was busily working the mussel beds.

In comparison with the industrial era, when there could be scores of ships riding at anchor as they waited to enter the port, and when public holidays saw thousands of workers and their families thronging the sands, Swansea Bay today is relatively deserted. Days can pass without a single freighter crossing to or from the twin piers of the port. Joggers, dog walkers, five- to twenty-aside footballers, kite flyers, windsurfers, the odd sunbather are common sights on the foreshore – but with hectares, usually, of empty beach between them.

The largest vessel regularly to cross the bay, until late 2006, was the Swansea–Cork *Superferry* (1972; rebuilt 1991), a heavily smoking, white leviathan of a tub that had more in common with a supermarket than a ship. In 2005, some 116,000 passengers used the ferry – a considerable decline from the 1995 figure of 163,000, resulting apparently from the growing low-cost airline market. At the height of the season, the ferry would round Mumbles Head at about 7 p.m., and a couple of hours later it would be belching back across the bay on its ten-hour journey to Ireland.

smacking lushly ashore
from the bay long becalmed –
the vanished ferry's wake

Swansea–Cork sailings for 2007 were cancelled, the company claiming it had failed to secure a replacement vessel for the *Superferry*. They hoped to resume the service in 2008.

Most vessels of any size have to take a pilot on board when approaching or leaving the port. Swansea's early pilots, who were fiercely competitive (and bibulous) freelancers, were often Gower men – such as the Aces. In 1803, it was ordered that “no person who Keeps a public House be appointed [as a pilot] in future”. The pilots eventually amalgamated and by the end of the nineteenth century they were working from a steam cutter, the *Beaufort* – named after the dukes of *Beaufort*, seigneurial lords of Gower and major players in the life of the port. The *Beaufort* was succeeded by the *Roger Beck*, named after the last chairman of the old Swansea Harbour Trust, which in turn was succeeded, in 1959, by the *Seamark*, whose distinctive red and yellow paintwork made her an instantly recognisable feature of Swansea Bay for over forty years.

My grandfather² having been chairman of the pilotage authority

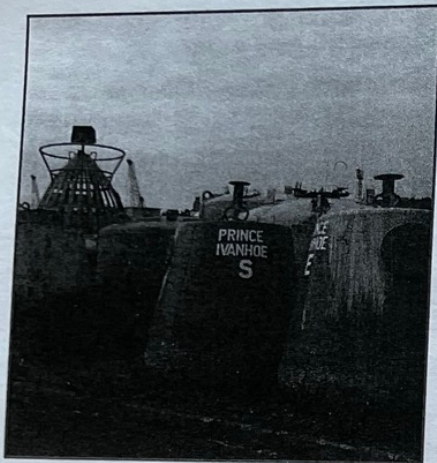


cliffs. It was especially exciting at night, particularly if the wind was up: the closer we'd sidle to a tanker's hull, the wilder would the sea boil between the two vessels, as the pilot – in anorak and trilby, and bearing a briefcase – would balance himself on the *Seamark*'s gunwale and then, when the angle was right, hurl himself over the roiling divide toward a rope ladder dangling down from the tanker.

The more stressful aspects of the job were compensated for by long lulls between ships, when the *Seamark* would drift for hours in the bay; then, perhaps, it would be time for a nap, or a read, or some television in the upward-sloping lounge, with a tumbler of something restorative from the drinks cabinet. The pilots, in those pre-breathalyzer days, were generous hosts. When, on one of our visits, it was noticed that there were no lemons for the gin-and-tonics, it was no trouble at all to chug back into port to pick up a lemon or two from the red-brick, castellated Pilot House. At the end of her sea-going life, the *Seamark* was donated to the Cardiff sea cadets, and lies now in the Roath basin. Her successor (from 2001) is another *Beaufort*. A chunky, utilitarian craft, the *Beaufort* is capable of 18 knots – twice the speed of the *Seamark* – which means quick drop-offs and returns, and no more hanging about for hours in the middle of Swansea Bay, chatting about music and books while waiting for tardy hulks of the deep.

A regular and distinctive visitor to the bay – black hull, white superstructure, yellow, squared-off 'A' lifting gear at her prow – whose identity and purpose often puzzle the casual observer, is the Trinity House tender *Mermaid* (1987). Based at Swansea, her job is to ferry to and from Trinity House's west-coast base at Swansea every buoy on southern Britain's western seaboard when it's due for

and my grandmother, consequently, having been invited to launch the *Seamark* at Appledore in Devon, I and other members of the family enjoyed several days aboard the *Seamark* during the 1960s, bustling around among the tankers and freighters, as we put pilots aboard the incoming ships and took them off the ships that were outward bound, towering above us, as we came alongside, like impossible steel



its five-yearly refurbishment. The buoys – the bigger, older ones weighing six tonnes or more – are picked up and later repositioned with pinpoint, satellite-navigated accuracy. They are hoisted aboard along with the 50-metre chains that tether them to the ‘sinkers’ – huge bath-plug-like weights (of between 1 and 5 tonnes) – which rest immovably on the sea bed. The *Mermaid*'s crew of seventeen spend three weeks

aboard, and then take three weeks off. Her sister ship, the ‘yacht’ *Patricia* (1982), based at Harwich and responsible for the buoys on the eastern seaboard, is an occasional visitor to Swansea. Slightly smaller but notably plusher, the *Patricia* is equipped with state rooms for the English royal family and accommodation for paying guests; her cruises to Ireland and around the Severn Sea are much in demand.

Regular summer-season visitors to the bay include the motor cruiser *Balmoral* (1949) and her older sister ship the *Waverley* (1947), which claims to be the last ocean-going paddle-steamer in the world, and is evocative of the White Funnel Fleet steamers, such as the *Glengower*, the *Cardiff Queen* and the *Westward Ho!*, which used to ply regularly between Swansea and Ilfracombe until the mid twentieth century. The *Balmoral* and the *Waverley* offer cruises along the Gower coast and trips to Ilfracombe and Lundy – rather too raucously boozy, on occasion, for some tastes. Then there are the regattas, the flotillas of tiger-moth dinghies, the pleasure craft of sail and motor, the jet-skis of macho egomaniacs desperately trying to prove something – and the windsurfers. In April, 2006, a Swansea windsurfer, Adam Cowles, hit the headlines after a quick scoot across the bay turned into an epic – and potentially lethal – adventure. He realised things were getting out of hand when the shoreline behind him vanished and he passed a huge cargo ship. “It was at that point I had a moment of inspiration,” he told *The Evening Post*. “I just thought I would carry on and head towards Devon.” Three hours later, he stumbled ashore 65 km from where he had started, at what some surprised locals informed him was Woody Bay, near Lynton.

high tide after the storm,
the bay bobbing with
bits of forest

Swansea Bay, over the years, has seen some curious sights. The sands near the west pier were Swansea's first airport: in the early decades of the twentieth century, the post would be delivered to the town by a flimsy, two-seater aircraft, its approach requiring someone to clear a landing strip among the bathers – who'd later be offered, for a fee, a ride over the bay in this newfangled contraption. Until the end of the century, when most travelling shows stopped using animals, every circus that came to town would take its elephants for a wallow in the sea at Brynmill. More recently, *The World* (2001), that restlessly nomadic floating city for the super-rich, dropped anchor in the bay, to enable its denizens to stock up on essentials at Sainsbury's and Tesco. Homes aboard *The World*, which is on a continuous circumnavigation of the globe, cost nearly \$2m dollars apiece, offers considered only from those with assets of \$5m or more.

If plans to site a 30-turbine nest of 134-m high cash generators around the Scarweather Sands – the biggest offshore wind farm in Britain – proved highly controversial, there is considerable (and not, generally, unfavourable) public interest in an ambitious scheme to build in Swansea Bay the world's first tidal lagoon for generating electricity. Constructed of rock, slate, sand and gravel, it would look like a circular island at low tide and be invisible at high tide; covering around 5 sq km, it would generate, on both incoming and outgoing tides, enough electricity to provide power for 10,000 homes. But the plan has been undermined by a report from the Department of Trade and Industry which claims that the scheme is not economically viable. The lagoon's many supporters have vowed to continue the campaign for its construction, arguing that for the same price as the proposed (and ecologically damaging) Severn barrage at least 150 lagoons could be constructed. Generation costs from a lagoon, they say, would be around 2.5 pence and from the barrage 5.5 pence per kilowatt hour.

hooter booms –
and a slice of the city
sails into the night