

explore wembury

The Great Mewstone

From this point you are treated to panoramic views out across Wembury Bay. On the far side of the Tamar, to your right, you can see Rame Head in Cornwall. To your left are Gara Point and the mouth of the Yealm estuary. But it is the Great Mewstone which dominates the view.

This small rocky island stands about half a mile out from Wembury Point and is the largest offshore island for many miles along the South Devon coast. The Great Mewstone gets its name from the old English name for the herring gull and these, along with many other birds, are the only inhabitants on the island these days. It is owned by the National Trust and, as there is no public access, it is rich in wildlife and an important conservation area.

Island Life

In 1744 a local man was found guilty of a minor crime and sentenced to be 'transported' to the island for seven years! He stayed there with his family for the entire

time, not once returning to the mainland. His daughter, known as 'Black Joan' remained on the island, married and raised three children..

Later, in the early 1800s, Samuel Wakeham and his wife Ann set up home (pictured right) on the island. They enlarged an existing house and cleared a garden to grow food and keep some animals. Sam offered boat trips from Wembury beach to the Mewstone. His instructions for people to summon him were printed in a letter in the magazine, South Devon Monthly Museum in 1834:



Sam Wakeham's House

"If any genteciman what likes a wark, he can wark to the shoar at Wembury, and if they holds up there white pockethanchecuffs for a signal, an ile cum off in me bote and fetch them to the island for two pence appease"

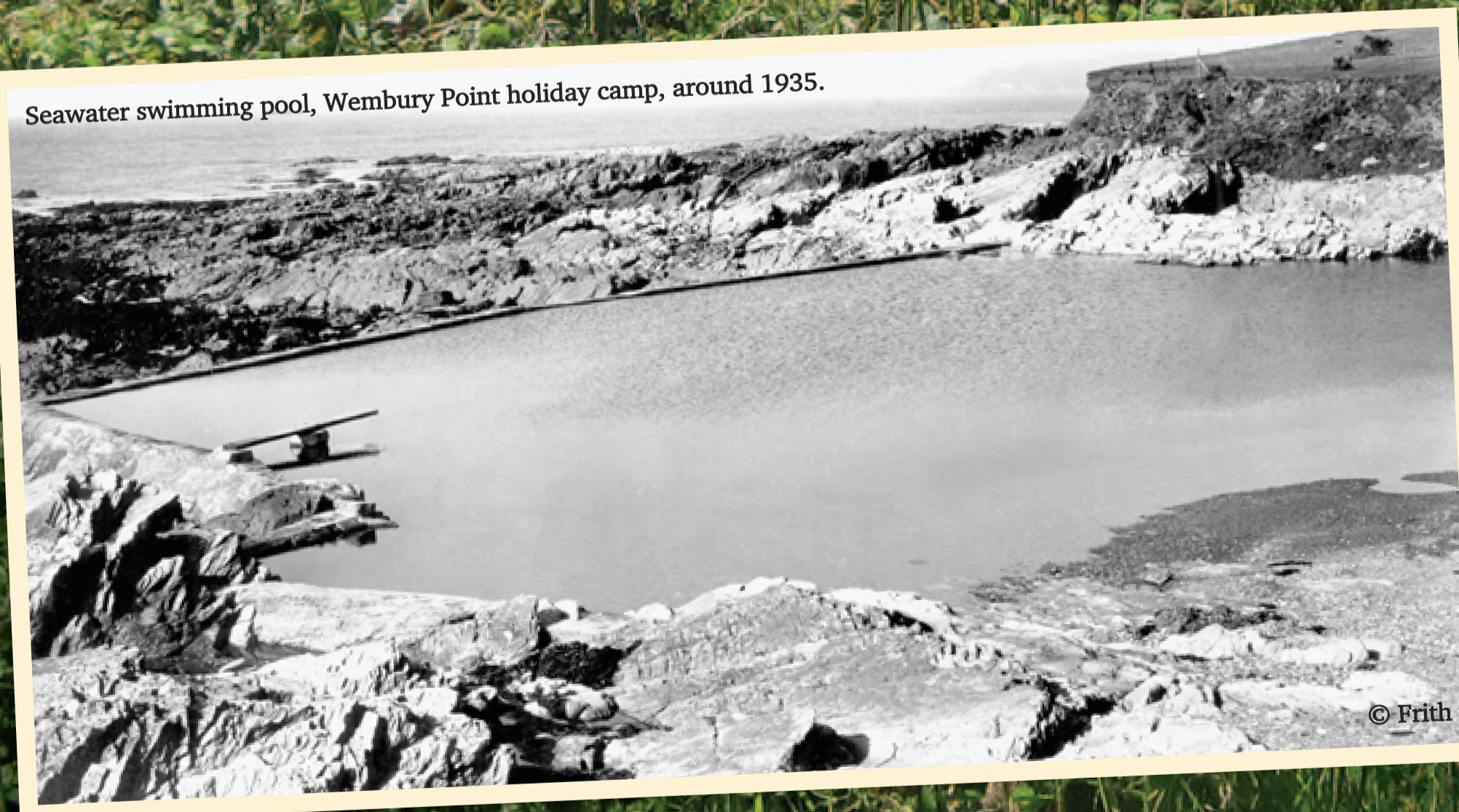


Visitors to the Great Mewstone in the 1920s.

With kind permission of Gillian Long

Sam might have stayed on the island for the rest of his days, had he not been caught smuggling! He was lured into a trap by a crafty excise man and had to leave the island. Nobody is recorded to have lived on the island since. The island was sold in the 1927 sale of the Langdon Estate and bought by Mr Stansell of Heybrook Bay for £500. He sold it on a year later to a Miss Goldman of London for £575, who then presented it to her brother as a wedding present!

Seawater swimming pool, Wembury Point holiday camp, around 1935.



Exploring nearby

If you walk down to the coastline from here you can still see remains of a slipway and boathouse, used for trips over to the Great Mewstone. There are also remains of a seawater swimming pool. This was part of the Heybrook Bay Lido – a holiday camp with nearly 200 wooden chalets. It was one of two holiday camps which were sited here on Wembury Point, prior to the Second World War.

Further back up the hill, on the old site of HMS Cambridge, there is more information about the base and the restoration work undertaken by the National Trust. You can also find out all about the military history of Wembury if you follow the coast path along towards Bovisand and the Fort.

Photo courtesy of David Pinder



In the line of fire

In World War II the Great Mewstone was taken over by the War Office. After the war it was retained because it lay in the line of fire from HMS Cambridge. This was the navy's main shore based gunnery school in the south west, with its guns pointing out to sea from the hillside behind you. Live firing practice was conducted most weekdays and shattered the peace of the coast for miles. HMS Cambridge was decommissioned in 2001.

Photo courtesy of David Pinder



In safe hands

The National Trust ran a successful campaign to raise the £350,000 needed to buy Wembury Point and the Mewstone from the MoD after the naval base closed. The gun emplacements, buildings and security fences were demolished. The site is managed today for quiet public enjoyment and is a haven for wildlife.

