

Caldey Island: Wales's Island Monastery

Caldey Island lies cradled in the South Pembrokeshire coast on the western fringes of Wales, 3 miles off Tenby. Derived from the Viking Keld–Eye meaning ‘Cold Island’, Caldey is one of Britain's holy islands.



The World of Serenity

More than a thousand years of prayer and quiet living has made this remote and beautiful island a haven of tranquility. Believed to have been inhabited since the Stone Age, Caldey was home to monks since Celtic times. Small boats ferry every 15 minutes (Monday–Saturdays from May–September) from Tenby harbour in 20 minutes to this sacred sanctuary, a small world apart.

The landing spot is the magnificent expanse of sandy beach at the Priory Bay, one of the best in Wales. From here a short stroll leads to the village and monastery. Set amidst peaceful wooded surroundings sloping gently into the bay, the beach is ideal to laze on sunny afternoons with the crashing surf rolling by or even walking, sunbathing, swimming or building sandcastles. Since it is accessible only on reaching Caldey, it never gets too crowded even during summer.

Chocolate from the Abbey

The Caldey Abbey is presently a working monastery with the Cistercian/Trappist monks – one of the more ascetic of the monastic disciplines. Constructed in 1910 by John Coates–Carter in unusual traditional Italianate style, this Grade 2 building is Caldey's most prominent landmark occupied since 1929.

The present fourteen monks follow the original purity of the Rule of St. Benedict with vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Devoting their lives to the service of God, they live as per an austere set of rules set to a demanding timetable of prayer, study and work, attending seven services a day in the simple dignity of the monastery church (the first at 3.15 a.m.!) and observing silence (7 p.m.–7 a.m.). Their routine shows that monastic life is not for the fainthearted but for those with a genuine vocation for spiritual life.

The monks contribute in farming with the 50–odd islanders. If lucky, one can catch a glimpse of them maintaining a prime beef herd or baking shortbread in the monastery oven. They produce myriad home–

grown items including tomatoes, chocolate, ice cream, milk, butter, clotted cream and yoghurt.

The refectory for communal meals is an imposing oak paneled hall with timbered roof. The cloister for contemplation is set around a central garden – the girth. Although monastery tours are available only for men anyone can attend the church service.



Caldey's Landmarks

The village gift shop is well stocked with items from the Abbot's Kitchen besides souvenirs and books on island life, poetry collections and plainsong CDs. The unusual design of the Caldey Island Post Office (1913) by John Coates Carter blends with the Abbey's extravagant architecture. It sells postcards and special covers. Those posted here receive a Caldey Island imprint. The Video Centre displays a 20-minute film *The Monks of Caldey Island* offering insights on monastic life. Enjoy an unhurried snack in the Tea Gardens or a leisurely picnic.

Just outside the island's main settlement is the medieval stone chapel of St. David, the parish church of Caldey on a small hill with its impressive round-arched Norman door. Possibly, the foundations and nave stonework date to a 6th century Celtic chapel. In the church courtyard lies the simple graves of monks and islanders marked with weather-beaten, wooden crosses on a possible Celtic burial site.

The Victorian landowners restored the church after the Dissolution of Monasteries (1536) and the Benedictine monks added the unique stained glass windows. The most unusual Fish Window has the ancient Christian symbol with a contemporary feel in a 1920's design by Theodore Bailey. The most impressive is Tree of Life Window depicts a threefold tree, possibly symbolizing the Trinity and three crosses on Calvary. Illuminated by the afternoon sun, it gives a stunning sense of the Creator breathing life and light into the world.

Ancient Church

The village signpost directs one past the fuchsia hedges to the St. Illtyd's Church, a consecrated Roman Catholic Church still used as a place of worship with its ancient stone walls and pebble floors worn smooth by time and generations of worshippers. The oldest part is the Prior's Tower, built as a fortified house by Robert Fitzmartin to whom Caldey was given by Henry I. Fitzmartin in turn gave it to his mother who donated it to the Benedictine monks of St. Dogmael's who retained it till the Dissolution.



Fitzmartin's house was modified between the 13th– 15th centuries. The original vaulted chapel forms the sanctuary of the larger church with a 14th century spire. Entering through the western tower, one observes the gatehouse with storage rooms, dormitory, kitchen, refectory and fishpond outside the cloister. Medieval etchings on walls depict skulls and crossbones.

The 12th century historic Priory is one of the most interesting buildings abandoned in 1536 and restored in the 20th century. Constructed from limestone and sandstone, indigenous to Caldey it is believed to occupy a 6th century Celtic monastic site where the Caldey Stone inscribed in the Celtic Ogham script was excavated to be displayed in the church for visitors.

The Caldey Lighthouse perched high above the breakers on Chapel Point was built by Trinity House, the lighthouse authority for England and Wales in 1829. It works with the Lundy North Lighthouse to aid navigation in the Bristol Channel. On either sides of the tower are the erstwhile dwellings of resident keepers prior to its conversion to automatic operation (1927). As the last lighthouse powered by acetylene gas until conversion to mains electricity (1997), it opens up spectacular views of the Pembrokeshire Coastline, Preseli Hills, Lundy Island and Gower Peninsula.

Perfumes from the Island

The principal income for Caldey is tourism in addition to locally produced items during winter. However, the most interesting business venture is the manufacture of the famous range of Caldey Island perfumes and toiletries (colognes, bath essences, hand lotions, aftershaves and soaps) inspired by the profusion of local wild flowers and herbs.

Since the 1950's lavender bunches from the monastery garden were dried and sold to visitors giving the idea of creating perfumes commercially. An island building was converted into a perfumery and expert perfumers helped the monks formulate sophisticated high quality fragrances of the Caldey brand. With the popularity of perfumes outstripping supply, the complex compounding process was outsourced to the Belgian perfumer Ivo Jacobs to painstakingly re–create the classic fragrances of Caldey.

The lavender perfumes acclaimed "simply the best lavender soliflore on earth" by perfume critic Luca Turin are sold in Caldey's shops, in Tenby, through mail order and online, using the island's website.

Tour the Caldey Island

Caldey provides a spiritual retreat in limited self–catering properties between Easter – October for those

wishing to attend monastic services and experience spiritual life in solitude. A fire engine, ambulance and Coastguard team exists. Free guided tours offer insights on Caldey's history, churches and daily life. Or explore yourself keeping to the footpaths for safety. Caldey is also dog friendly. A sharp eye, luck and patience often reveals grey seal pups basking in the ocean swells or nesting seabird colonies on the cliffs.

While acknowledging the importance of tourism in Caldey, its natural beauty, historical significance of the monastery, limiting visitors, improving the jetty and coastal defense are issues of concern. Coupled with breath-taking natural beauty and the commercialism in Tenby, a day out in the enchanting, tranquil oasis can leave a thoughtful holiday maker with memories of a deeper, lasting kind.

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