

1 Introduction

So we'd drift, until,
at the edge of his sense, of this world,
came the faint mewl of kittiwakes
and whummeling gulls, and so dead
slow or slow, he'd nudge past the rocks,
judging the distance to hold this,
his small boat of the living, by those cries,
you could almost believe were of souls.

From *The Captain* (6.29 pm on the Isle of May)
by Kathleen Jamie (2000)

1.1 Location and description (Illus 1.1 and 1.2)

Standing on Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh and looking ENE (on a clear day), the Isle of May (Illus 1.1) is clearly visible 45km distant at the vanishing point between the Bass Rock on the East Lothian coast and Fife Ness at the mouth of the Firth of Forth, where the estuary merges with the North Sea. The May (as the island is commonly known) occupies a strategic position, and dominates the seaward views from much of the East Neuk of Fife. The nearest landfall is at Kilrenny 10km away on the Fife side, whereas North Berwick lies 18km to the SW (Illus 1.2). The island is just over 1.5km in length, and less than 400m at its widest, covering about 57ha, of which at least a tenth consists of rocky foreshore (Illus 1.3). There are high cliffs, 45m in height, facing East Lothian to the S and W, while the land slopes down to the sea on the Fife side. The highest point is 51m above sea level.

This is a small island, yet its scale is disproportionate to its importance to the history and mythology of the area, when water-borne travel was easier and quicker than travel by land. The island is the gateway to the Forth, the maritime route to and from some of the main centres of power, trade and population in Scotland. This was therefore a prestigious and central location, which has only recently become remote.

The geology and scenery give the island an almost Hebridean character, yet the May is close to the heart of E central Scotland. It is the most easterly of the islands within the Forth. The others are, from W to E: Inch Garvie (beneath the Forth Rail Bridge, not illustrated), Cramond, Inchcolm, Inchmickery, Inchkeith, Fidra, Lamb, Craigleith and the Bass Rock.

The May has been wonderfully well described in a book by the late Joe Eggeling, from which part of this description is derived (Eggeling 1985). The island's rocky shore contains only two beaches: the boulder-covered Pilgrim's Haven, and the sandy Kirk Haven just to the E of the monastery. These were the landings used from earliest times, until the latter was transformed

by the construction of a stone quay by the Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB) in the early 19th century, while another was constructed in an inlet towards the N end at Altarstanes. The water supply would always have presented a problem for the inhabitants. Rain water would have been collected, and while there are five deep wells, only St Andrew's Well is both potable and dependable, albeit somewhat brackish – just about acceptable for making tea, but not for putting in whisky. As water was only second place to the medieval community as a thirst-quencher (ale serving that purpose), this would not necessarily have been a problem.

The less rocky parts of the island are covered in a mixed grassy sward, with great shows in early summer of sea campion and thrift. Many of the decent areas of soil, well-manured by the seabirds, have been much disturbed by the large rabbit population, believed to have been introduced onto the island by the Cluniac monks in the 12th century. Peat has formed around some of the shallow pools, for example at Three Tarn Nick on the N plateau.

One of the main coastal navigational lights is sited on the May, under the control of the NLB since it replaced the 17th-century coal-burning beacon in 1816. The greatest changes to the character of the island took place at this time, with the construction of the lighthouse-keeping infrastructure – keepers' houses, engine houses, workshops, roads, landings, and the enclosing of plots for cultivation behind high stone walls. The island figured prominently in World Wars I and II as a naval communications centre. However, the May is best known in recent times as the internationally important seasonal home to a breeding colony of around 250,000 seabirds, and has been a National Nature Reserve since 1956, now owned and managed by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The place name is thought to derive from the Old Norse word for gull, reflecting the pre-eminence of seabirds in the popular conception of the island over many centuries (Simon Taylor pers comm).

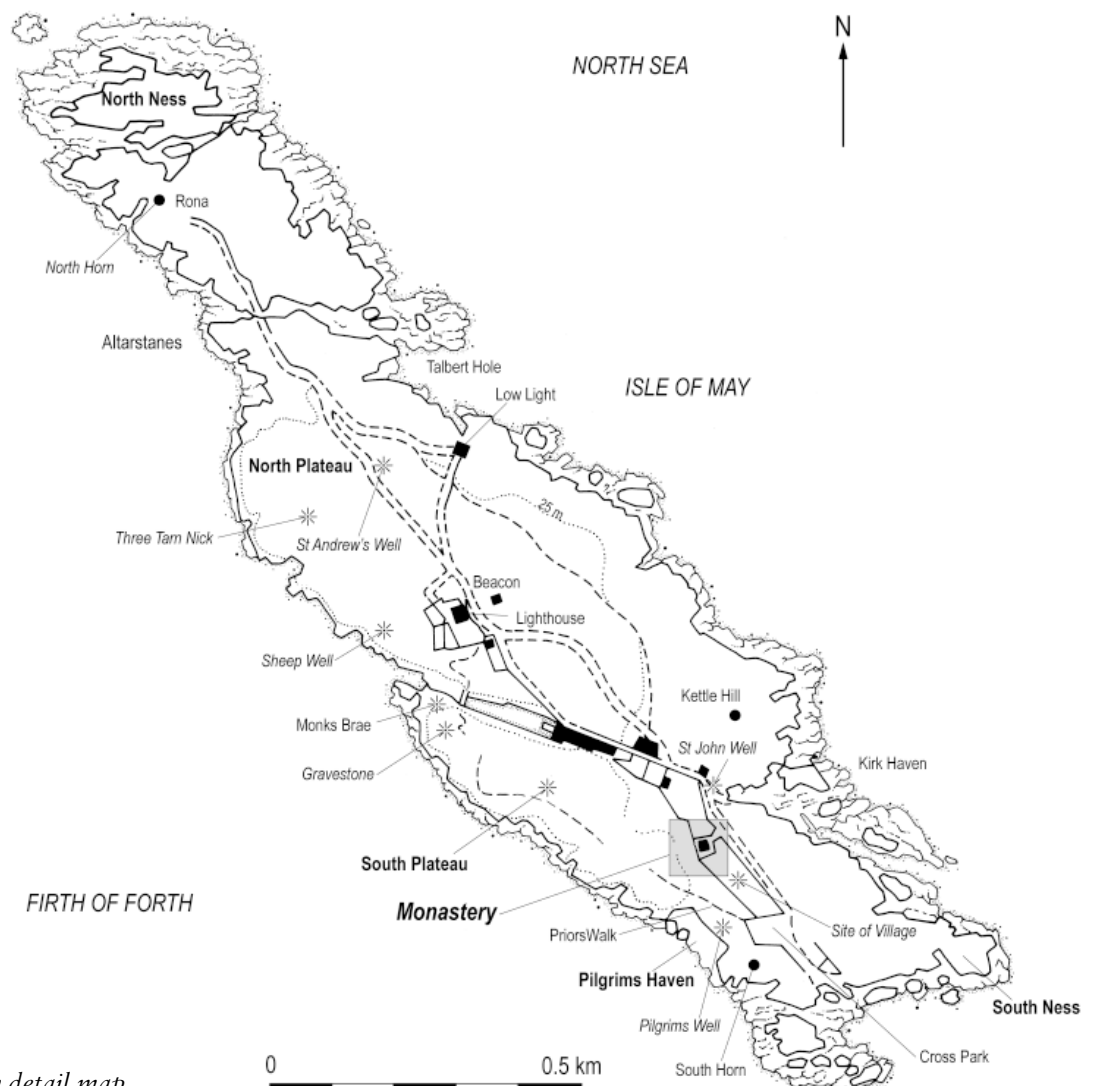
The excavations were focused on the likely site of the monastery as occupied today by a ruined building standing to gable height, containing architectural features dated to both the 13th and 16th centuries. This building, which was aligned N–S, has long been named 'St Adrian's Chapel' on Ordnance Survey maps (NGR NT658 990, NMRS/Fife SMR NT69NE001). This is in a sheltered location, tucked into the lee of a high rock face to the W, with an open aspect to the E. The available land was naturally bounded to the E by a steep slope down to Kirk Haven. The site is equidistant from the two main landings at Kirk Haven to the E and Pilgrim's Haven to the W, each just 200m away.

1.2 Geology and setting

Geikie (1902) first described the geology of the May; it received further attention from Walker in 1936, and has been discussed more recently by Forsyth and Chisholm in 1977. The island is made up of a single sill of teschenite (Forsyth and Chisholm 1977), also called olivine-dolerite (greenstone). This is of Carboniferous age and is similar to many other sills intruded in eastern Scotland during this period of magmatism. There are steep cliffs on the SW side, up to 45m high in places, with a distinctive columnar structure, visible especially around Pilgrim's Haven. Towards the NE the ground slopes more gently to the sea due to the eastward dip of the sill. The surface of the island probably represents the upper contact of the sill with enclosing sediments. A series of faults, orientated E–W, divides the island into four at high tide, and these form geos (rocky creeks) where they meet the sea. A particularly deep gully separates the N and S plateaus, and this now contains a small loch, which was created in the early 19th century to provide water for the NLB's engine house. At the N end, the areas of Rona and North Ness are effectively cut off at high tide.

There are three distinct rock terraces and cliffs on the island formed by combined marine and peri-glacial erosion. These were previously named the 25ft, 50ft and 100ft raised beaches, which are a feature of the Forth shores, but are now termed late glacial shorelines. The monastery site is located fairly centrally within the 50ft raised beach, which extends along the SE coast from the lighthouse keepers' houses in the N to Cross Park, the field at the far S end of the island. The beach at Pilgrim's Haven contains a large proportion of locally derived angular pebbles, some of which are of sandstone from the rock beneath the sill.

Although ice-grooving occurs on the bedrock, probably from 500m of late Devensian ice from 23,000 BP, finally receding about 15,000 BP (Boulton, Peacock and Sutherland 1991), there are no drift deposits covering the island. The rock is generally covered with only a layer of peat through which it often protrudes especially on exposed areas. On the raised beach SE of the lighthouse keepers' houses there is a deep cultivated soil, which is likely to have been created by middening since at least the medieval period. This area was enclosed by field walls in the ninth century, after which it was further cultivated by the lighthouse keepers.



Illus 1.3 Isle of May detail map.