

100 Days On Holy Island

A Writer's Exile

Peter Mortimer



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100 DAYS ON HOLY ISLAND

A Writer's Exile

Peter Mortimer



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my father,
Alex Mortimer, 1915-2001.*

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AUTHOR INFO

Peter Mortimer is a poet, playwright and editor, hidden away in the windy north-east coastal village of Cullercoats. He has written plays for most of the region's theatre companies, and his poetry collections are for either children or adults, though it's not always clear which. He is occasionally moved to such inadvisable forays as this book; previous examples are *The Last of the Hunters* - six months at sea working with North Shields fishermen, and *Broke through Britain*, a 500-mile penniless odyssey from Plymouth to Edinburgh. He is the founder/editor of IRON Press, and the founder/artistic director of Cloud Nine Theatre Productions, both highly active on the north-east arts scene. When asked, he will clown around with serious intent as a writer-in-schools. His new poetry collection, *I Married the Angel of the North*, is due in 2002 from Five Leaves Press.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not everyone on Holy Island was totally delirious at my plonking myself down there for 100 days. For the many people who *were* able to offer me help and support, I am heartily grateful. Thanks to Angela Wright for once again offering me a Whitley Bay sanctuary to write the final draft, also the Riverdale Hall Hotel, Bellingham, and John Cocker for vastly reduced accommodation rates when I was about the same task.

AUTHOR'S HEALTH WARNING

Readers wanting an historical book about Holy Island should look elsewhere. Such books are legion. For a quick condensation of the main historical points, try below. After this, history is secondary to my purposes.

St Aidan founded a community of Christian monks on Holy Island, a small and remote settlement off the north-east coast of England, in AD 635. This was at the request of King Oswald of Northumbria, whose desire was to convert the pagan Northumbrians.

The island's Norman name was *insula sacra* (sacred isle). The name Lindisfarne is said to have come from the Old English 'lindon', meaning water, and 'faron', meaning island - though no one is certain. Druids lived on the island before Christians.

Aidan was followed by St Cuthbert, under whose influence Holy Island became one of Europe's most important centres of Christianity. Cuthbert died in AD 687, and when his body was dug up in 698, it was found to be 'uncorrupted' i.e. had not decayed. The small island off Holy Island is known as St Cuthbert's Island (aka Hob's Thrush), a place the saint went for isolation and prayer, later exiling himself to the even more remote Inner Fame Islands.

Frequent Viking raids forced the monks to flee with Cuthbert's body in 875, and after much wandering they eventually settled in Durham, where the great cathedral was built in his honour. The famous Lindisfarne Gospels were also created in Cuthbert's honour around AD 698 by the monk Eadfrith.

Benedictine monks rebuilt the old wooden Priory in 1082, also from stone, and again in honour of St Cuthbert. The Priory was destroyed by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century, and the distinctive Holy Island castle built from the Priory stone as a fortress in 1570. The castle's neglected remains were rebuilt in 1903 by the new owner, Edward Hudson, to designs by the famous architect Edwin Lutyens.

Nothing of huge historical significance has happened on Holy Island in the last 500 years.

The visitor passes through a place,
the place passes through the pilgrim.

Cynthia Ozick

Only earth and sky matter.

Annie Proulx

I was better with the sound of the sea
Than with the voices of men
And in desolate and desert places
I found myself again.

Hugh MacDiarmid

[Holy Island is] an afterthought of land.

Melvyn Bragg

INTRODUCTION

The idea to spend 100 days on Holy Island took root in February 2000 when my partner, the writer Kitty Fitzgerald, and I rented a cottage on Lindisfarne (the island's alternative name) one ferociously windy winter weekend.

Holy Island lies off England's north-east coast, nine miles south of the market town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, and the Scottish border. It is part of Northumberland, England's fifth largest and least populated county. Historically and culturally (as well as geographically) this has been an isolated, fiercely individual region, one in which I'd come to live for a couple of years in 1970, and found myself unable to leave.

Both Kitty and I live 50 miles south in the large conurbation of Tyneside and, like most residents of the north-east, we found that Holy Island sat quietly in our consciousness as a special place to visit occasionally; simultaneously famous and remote. It is known as the cradle of Christianity.

In summer, the island teems with visitors - the main car park is almost as big as the village itself. The visitors' time on the island (like much else here) is dictated by the tides which twice daily sever Holy Island from the mainland. In those final minutes before the causeway is swallowed by the sea, a production line of cars makes its way westwards. Some leave it too late and are stranded. People have been known to get caught and be drowned.

Being on the island when the tide is 'shut' leaves you strangely possessive about the place. There *is* overnight accommodation in the few hotels and bed & breakfasts but

the vast majority of visitors are daytrippers. The streets fall quiet, the pubs' atmospheres change, the island takes possession of itself once more, and you feel strangely superior to the thousands who have just left.

In winter, visitor numbers are greatly reduced, often to almost none. The cold and the wind are great deterrents. The small community seems to huddle into itself for survival, the few shops and other facilities are mostly closed. Many of the holiday properties sit empty.

As our winter weekend progressed, Kitty and I walked the island shoreline in a howling gale. We plunged across the empty sand dunes. In our ignorance, we'd brought little food, and found there was little to buy. The four pubs/hotels seemed dark and shuttered. The island was in hibernation, the odd hunched figure scurrying along a village street.

I was intrigued. I'd always found the idea of a 'holiday paradise' somewhat tedious; indolence on white sands next to a blue sea, interspersed with the odd tequila slammer, would drive me mad. Holy Island was harsh, in many ways unwelcoming, and these were the very reasons I wanted to spend a winter on it.

It's a small island, its shape somewhere between that of a tadpole and an amoeba about to separate into two. All the inhabitants are huddled in the village, shaken down into the bottom south corner, like balls in a bag. Strangely, the village has no name.

The island's giddy, improbable castle (the most famous landmark) is perched on Beblow Crag, a piece of rock which twirls upwards like a Mr Whippy ice cream, and lies to the east of the village. Its 100 ft height is accentuated by the snooker-table flatness of the land around.

The only other altitude of note, and part of the same Whin Sill geographical fault, is the Heugh, a 50-ft-high outcrop behind the ruins of the Priory - Holy Island's second most famous landmark, pillaged by Henry VIII in the great monastery dissolution.

There are two sheep farms on the main eastern 'lump'. The island narrows to a wasp waist, then grows bulbous again for the western section where the land deteriorates into sand dunes. This houses only two inhabited buildings, Snook House and Snook Tower - more of these later. The causeway runs along the southern edge of these dunes, and finally parts company with the island on its final stretch to the mainland. A motorists' refuge box is halfway along this stretch.

An important chance meeting during our weekend was with Ross and Jean Peart, who run the Open Gate bed & breakfast and retreat house. They invited us for Sunday lunch, where I explained my germinating idea of living on the island for a winter. Their enthusiasm and offers of help went a long way to cementing my resolve, and they became among my closest friends during my stay.

I knew Holy Island was a tight-knit community and that by nature such communities were conservative, often suspicious. I realised the sudden appearance for three months of a noisy writer (for noisy I am), may not be greeted with total delirium. I knew too that a great deal had been written and filmed about Holy Island and its historical and religious importance. Before and during my stay I would read and view most of it. I knew its history revolved around its brace of Saints, Cuthbert and Aidan, and how they helped rekindle Christianity in a 'heathen' land. And I knew film-makers were attracted by the unique terrain - Roman Polanski had shot *Cul-de-Sac* and *Macbeth* here. But little seemed to have been written about living on this island around the turn of the millennium. Holy Island was identified by its past more than its present. Its image in people's minds had more to do with its history than its reality. This seemed a strange state of affairs. How did it affect its population?

Not long ago, this population had been 600, but had now dropped to around 150. Much of the fishing industry had

gone; the dozen pubs that had once catered for the thirsty sailors from the many visiting ships had now reduced to four. There were few signs of employment outside the tourist season, the ugly Lindisfarne Mead factory apart. Four new houses had been built, and one pub had been converted into an airy and attractive Heritage Centre. That apart, the island seemed to have changed little in decades.

Despite the influx of summer visitors, there were no take-aways, no amusement arcades, no caravans or tents, no jukeboxes, no crazy golf, no candy floss, no fairground rides, no fish-and-chip shops.

In winter, the pubs seemed more closed than open, as did the small village store. The castle shut up shop till the new season. The Heritage Centre and the Post Office, though, opened daily. There were three churches, a tiny school, the odd Celtic craft shop. What *was* Holy Island – urban, rural or seaside? I couldn't decide.

With Jean and Ross Peart's help, I arranged to rent the Cuddy House for my 100 days, which would start early January 2001. This was an old stone cottage in Fenkle Street (the middle of the village), owned by the painter Wendy Harman, who'd had to move off the island two years previously when her husband died. I met up with Wendy at the cottage in October, driving up the A1 in Kitty's old Morris Minor. It was as if, even then, I was to be reminded of the island's tidal disciplines. The car broke down and the delay meant I missed the tide, and faced a six-hour wait.

I'd written to Lord and Lady Crossman, whose family once owned virtually all of Holy Island and could still lay claim to large chunks of it. They lived on Cheswick Estate on the mainland a few miles north of the island, and I wanted to visit them. A few days after sending my letter my phone rang.

'Lady Crossman here,' said the cultured voice. This was the only time in my life I'd been phoned by nobility. What's more, she invited me up to see her. I sat in the large

drawing-room with a cup of tea on my lap. My socialist instincts always wanted to storm all upper-class barricades and raise the flag for a classless society. But the other part of me hung on the every word of the aristocracy.

The Crossmans' influence on the island was considerable and in my 100 days I never heard a negative word expressed about the family. Lord Humphrey Crossman was an ex-military man. A stroke had left him partially paralysed, his speech badly affected. Lady Rose explained how the family had bought the island in the nineteenth century for £16,000. In the 1940s, faced with huge bills to install running water in many of the properties, they'd decided to sell many of them instead. Lady Rose was elegant, refined, kind, hospitable and had that slight sense of upper-class remoteness. The couple had lost their son David in a plane accident three years earlier and in that elegant room, with its deep windows, fine furniture and sense of exclusiveness, there was an accompanying sense of sadness that neither privilege nor position could negate. Grief cares little for class.

I talked with Lady Rose for half an hour, at which point she stood and moved to sit in another chair. I knew instinctively this was a sign our audience was over, metaphorically touched my forelock, and took my leave.

As the time for my 100 days approached, I grew more apprehensive. Unlike when I was working on my book *Broke through Britain*, which involved a daily shifting landscape, here I would be confined for three months within a very small area. Would it drive me mad? Or would the islanders succumb first?

My resolution at this stage was not to leave the island. But how about visitors? My son Dylan's 17th birthday fell during my stay. I'd want him to come up. Kitty? I wasn't sure. My 100 days needed in some ways to be an 'exile'.

Mad ideas ran through my head. I would go to St Cuthbert's Island and rebuild St Cuthbert's ruined cell,

where the saint would go for solitary prayer and contemplation. I soon discovered that tinkering with such holy ruins was not on.

On the Holy Island website, I found details of St Cuthbert's Way, a 65-mile walk from the south-western Scottish town of Melrose (home of the saint's original monastery) to Lindisfame. I decided to walk it as a way of easing myself into the island. Curiously enough, this is one of the few journeys from Scotland to England where the destination is further north than the starting point.

I also decided to write to ten northern authors. I would ask each to select from their shelves a book (not written by themselves) that they thought might amuse, divert or challenge me during my stay. For the ceremonial handing over of the books, I threw a party at my Cullercoats house on 17 December (my birthday). Nine of the authors turned up with a book and the party came and went. Christmas, too. The date of 5 January 2001 loomed nearer. I had never been away from my home for such a length of time. I was a confirmed urbanite going into a tiny, isolated, self-contained community with the conceit of writing a book about my stay. As to the shape and nature of the book, I had little idea.

I am grateful to the Society of Authors for financial assistance towards my stay. Also to New Writing North, who gave me a 'Time to Write' award to work on the book on my return.

What was I running from, or towards? What had prompted me to plonk myself down on this bleak, windswept location for more than three months?

And would anyone talk to me?

I had no answers. But I would have 100 days to find some.

SUNDAY, 14 JANUARY 2001 - DAY ONE

Bereft - Bereaved

The new year started dramatically. In the three days before I was due to set off to Melrose and the 65-mile walk to Holy Island, two major events happened to the Mortimer family in Rotherham.

On 3 January, my father died, aged 85. The previous day my 27-year-old nephew Matthew required an emergency operation for the removal of the large intestine. He had developed ulcerative colitis and the potential consequences were dreadful. With my partner Kitty, I travelled the 130 miles south to Rotherham. I visited Matthew in hospital where he lay emaciated, deathly pale, virtually inert. He was strung up with tubes like strings on a puppet.

From there we went straight to the morgue for the shock of seeing my father's body, which still had to receive the 'cosmetic' treatment. He was a waxen collapse of flesh and bone, his toothless mouth horribly open in a silent scream. Our third call was the nursing home where my mother was wailing inconsolably at the loss of her husband of 60 years. At such times you operate on autopilot. It was bad for me but worse for my brother Alex - the blow for him was as a father and a son.

Twice more in the next few days I visited from Tyneside. On the second occasion the family drove down from Rotherham for my father's funeral at their erstwhile home town of Nottingham. We stood in the cold Catholic church

waiting for the undertaker's hearse, which arrived 20 minutes late, 20 minutes in which the poor organist exhausted her repertoire. I'd prepared a printed sheet about my father for the congregation. As with most funerals, the priest began with the words 'I never actually met Alex Mortimer but . . .' Thus our mechanical rituals. I delivered a slightly choked valediction.

These events delayed, and almost aborted, my Holy Island exile. I abandoned the idea of the 65-mile walk, and stared down at my brand-new walking boots and the two pairs of 1,000-Mile Blister-Free socks. The delay also brought practical difficulties with the renting of the cottage. The latest I could arrive on Holy Island was 14 January. Which meant setting off two days after my father's funeral.

Another problem was my mother. The decision to 'shelter' her from the true length of my absence, to be vague about my return time, now consumed me with guilt. Plus the fact I was abandoning her when she most needed me. I walked away from her, alone in that chair in the glum lounge of one of those institutions where we conveniently shuffle off the old, visiting them as we can fit it in. In addition, my nephew was still seriously ill. And in these circumstances, I was planning to plonk myself long-term on a remote piece of rock, surrounded by a community I didn't know and probably had little in common with.

If my motivation for the trip was less than all-consuming, it was at that moment that I fell back on the ruthlessness of the writer, that necessary but often disruptive instinct that powers him or her on, often to almost indefensible lengths.

I hugged my son Dylan goodbye. His formative years and never three months absent from his father. Everything I knew seemed to be disappearing over the horizon.

Kitty ran me to Holy Island. I felt the need to cling to her like a limpet. The day offered a perfect cobalt sky, a brilliant blue, the sun's weak winter fingers just barely stroking warmth into a north-east January.

We drove mainly in silence, as I resisted strongly the desire to shout 'Stop. Go back!' I wanted the reassurance of the familiar. I felt ill-equipped for the shock of the new.

The 50-odd-mile drive north was akin to entering a new galaxy. Holy Island came finally into view, an offshore presence, as someone once wrote, like a submarine cutting through the waves, a misty silhouette, a crouching secret place that had dragged itself away from the life of the mainland and was now, for reasons unclear, dragging me with it.

You turn off from the A1 and within seconds the sense is of a world closing behind you. The road meanders five miles, dropping slowly towards the vast sand flats which spread themselves before you. You finally leave the mainland for the causeway and it is as if, at that moment, all defences are stripped away, as if you are now utterly exposed. Everything you think you know counts for nothing, as the tiny dot of you traverses that huge empty landscape.

And the reason I was doing this - the only reason I could be certain of - was that I am a writer and it was this instinct that pushed me on.

The causeway met the western extreme of the island and hugged the shoreline as it curved towards the distant village, squatting on the skyline like a painted theatre set.

There was me, Kitty, her dog Polly, and Dylan's dog Jess, along with Wendy Harman, who was waiting for us at the Cuddy House. That made four females and me.

But soon there would be only me.

The cottage had thick old beams, slanting attic roofs, thick stone walls, deep recessed windows; a blazing fire was in the grate. *Homes & Gardens* would have approved. Except I had a sickness in the soul, a deep sense of unrootedness and loss. Like most people, I had long wondered how I would react to the death of a parent. My father had been very different to me, a council house shop-worker who started his own small business and was proud to move into the middle

classes and shed his Nottingham accent. He'd been fleeced by business sharks but bounced back. His values were not mine. With family that wasn't the main thing.

And what was I doing in this place, two days after he was put into the ground?

Wendy gave us tea, after which Kitty, the dogs and I took a long walk across the dunes. The sky was a metallic turquoise, deepening on the horizon to such intense scarlet that it reflected the sea almost blood-like.

The breaking waves were not white but blushing pink, and round 360 degrees the sky was clamped to the earth like a giant lid. Kitty chatted on. I knew her motive was to cheer me. We walked on the path Crooked Lonnen where a string of dramatic hawthorn bushes, blasted to crazy emaciated angles by the wind, trapped in their arthritic branches the skeletons of rabbits which presumably had sought refuge from predators but found only a tomb.

Back at the cottage Wendy explained island practicalities. A coalman came once a fortnight from Scotland. On Tuesdays, the vegetable man from somewhere else. On Thursdays, the butcher's van from the village of Bamburgh a few miles down the coast. Also the bin man from the border town of Berwick. The fish man (it appeared all these traders were male) was said to come on Wednesdays and Fridays but in my 100 days I never even saw a sprat on sale.

Most islanders, said Wendy, travelled the 20-mile round trip to the Berwick supermarkets for food. Once a week, for those without cars, the island mini-bus made the journey.

And what about scheduled buses?

Naturally. One went to Berwick every ten days. Depending on tides.

I had with me a few eggs, bread, bacon, tea-bags, some chicken pieces and milk. I was watching the clock every few minutes. I was dreading 9.30 p.m., when Kitty would have to leave ahead of the tide. I was dreading the thought of being alone. Wendy went off to stay with friends on the island.

Kitty and I took our final walk, up past the ruined Priory and on to the Heugh, that 50-ft-high outcrop on which, say some, was built the first Holy Island church.

The night was totally silent, the sky above us light-pollution-free, jet black, studded with fiercely burning stars. We walked along Sanctuary Close towards the cliff top; as the village light behind us melted to darkness, the two black dogs ran quickly in the long grass to invisibility.

Rarely had I so desperately felt the need for Kitty's love and support. And her with less than an hour left.

Back in the cottage, I busied myself to distraction, lining up on parade my washing and shaving kit in the small bathroom, folding shirts and trousers into place, strategically placing round the house my transistor radios, seeking to take root, make an identity.

On the mantelpiece I placed the three angels given me for good fortune by the members of my theatre company, Cloud Nine.

The time had come. I drove with Kitty to Chare Ends, the start of the causeway. A final close hug, a goodbye, and for several moments I watched her tail-lights grow weaker, more distant as she was sucked back to that mainland, taken away from this strange place that I was to make my home for 100 days. Then the night had swallowed her. There was only the blackness and the silence, and me in that terribly lonely spot. Tears ran down my cheeks.

Bereft. Bereaved. I turned and walked back through the silent dark village streets. Not a sign of life. Except one. Bizarrely. In a small pool of weak light thrown down by one of the lamp-posts stood a woman. She was protected against the crystalline cold by a fur hat and coat. And she was talking loudly into a mobile phone.

I entered the cottage to the strong smell of cloves from the simple chicken meal Kitty had cooked. The smell, and the last supper it evoked, flooded me with sadness. Proust and his madeleine, me and my chicken cloves.

And I could not bear to sit alone in that cottage. Instead, I walked round the village. The Manor House was dark and shuttered. The Ship was closed all winter. The Crown and Anchor was open. I peered through a bar window, to find a man glaring back at me with such an intensity I scuttled off into the night and could not bear to return.

I found some refuge in the small secreted bar of the Lindisfame Hotel. A sparse huddle of locals eyed with some unspoken curiosity the entry of this total stranger at 10 p.m. on a freezing January night, with the tide shut.

The small bar was curtained and seemed shut against the world. Its walls sported various contraptions, lobster pots, dangling seaweed, sepia prints of old fishermen, white beards the size of doormats. Behind the small corner bar were stacked more than 130 single malt whiskies in tiers steeper than the San Siro stadium. I didn't count them. I asked the owner, Clive Massey. With his wife Sue, he had been on the island 29 years.

I had been on only six hours. And it felt intolerable.

Someone asked me who I was. My contact with the islanders had begun.

MONDAY, 15 JANUARY 2001 - DAY TWO

Art and Gardens

For 99 per cent of the time, 99 per cent of Holy Island visitors (and residents too, come to that) stay in the east. Indeed, so much is the east part considered the entire island that in Karen Scammell's popular guide is the phrase 'you can walk around the island in an hour'. This is patently untrue. When I walked round the whole island it took me almost four. The island's western section - almost all sand dunes, with only the mysterious Snook Tower and House as signs of habitation - is virtually ignored by human beings.

My first full day on Lindisfarne. A dull grey sky, the strangeness of the house, banana sandwiches for breakfast, a fitful night's sleep, images of Kitty, Dylan, my dead father.

And at 9.30 a.m., a knock at my door. My optimism led me to expect a small welcoming committee, mulled wine and hot scones, a wee speech hoping my stay would be a fruitful one.

It was the washing machine repair man, sent by Wendy Harman.

He would be the only human being to cross my threshold for another ten days, such was the rush to see me. Indeed, in these early days the impression often was that I dragged in my wake on this island great surging waves of indifference.

The village store opened briefly, its winter shelves as sparse as those of Moscow shops in 1812. The fire had gone out. I drifted round the village, read a public noticing advertising an arts & crafts class that afternoon. I thought I'd go. Also advertised was a parish council meeting the next Friday. I'd go to that too. If my diary was free.

There were five women and me at the arts & crafts. No one seemed particularly surprised to see me. I made a collage.

In the Post Office, where I'd opened an account (no banks on the island), Malcolm Patterson was unsmiling. In the Manor House pub, licensee George Ward never stopped smiling. He reminded me of a ventriloquist.

I sat at the bar, looking out across the harbour at the bobbing boats. The castle was in the middle distance. The Priory lay just to one side. Picture postcard stuff.

George gave me some bad news. The Manor House would close for a fortnight's renovations. The Lindisfarne was closing for a winter break. The Ship was already shuttered up. This left the Crown and Anchor.

'Probably open weekends,' said George

I needed something to do. I had no function.

'You could dig the Manor House garden,' said George. Thus was born an unlikely relationship that led to blisters, poetry and the odd free potato.

I was the only customer in the Manor House that night. I walked home at 11 p.m. The village was dark, deserted, and as silent as a meditation class. The odd plume of smoke was tugged from the stone cottage chimneys.

It was silent in the way cities were never silent, silence not as a brief interruption from the traffic, the humans, the incessant noise of civilisation, but silent as a way of being. What lay beneath the surface of this small settlement I had no idea. But on a bitter cold January night in 2001, it offered up silence as a totally natural state.

TUESDAY, 16 JANUARY 2001 - DAY THREE

Icons and Expeditions

Food supplies were small. Tuesday was vegetable man day. I had no idea what time. I drifted down to the far end of Marygate, the village's main thoroughfare - downtown Lindisfarne. It took me three minutes.

The village school, a small white-washed building, had reopened the previous September. It had two pupils. When the tide was shut, that was. When the tide was open, teacher Caitlin White took them to the vast Howick school on the mainland, where pupils ran to double figures.

Caitlin, whose refined southern accent seemed slightly misplaced in this terrain, had come from teaching in Paddington, London, which was a bit different.

A two-pupil school - was there a dinner lady, did they call the register? Was there a parents' evening? School assembly?

I'd worked a good deal as a writer-in-school, many of them faceless sausage factories turning their pupils into dull functionaries and their teachers to mogadon. I fancied working here. With a minimum of bureaucracy or red tape, Caitlin and I fixed up a storytelling session for the following week.

The school had one classroom, one corridor and a playground big enough for 200. In times gone by, it had housed almost that number.