

Cover story: In a new series, Steve Snelling embarks on a Norfolk island-hopping odyssey that takes in the

Rising from a spectral swirl of sea mist, the straggle of sleek wind turbines represent a triumph of 21st century engineering rooted in the shifting sands of a ghostly and sometimes ghostly past.

Glimpsed from the air, they look for all the world like some misplaced children's windmills, a whirling source of Gulliveresque wonder as well as energy.

Yet not so long ago the only masts pointing skyward from Scroby Sands, off Great Yarmouth, belonged to the buried wrecks of hapless ships that had strayed fatally off course or been blown there by the same natural elements that proponents of wind power now seek to harness for the good of us all.

In recent times, those wretched, broken trunks upon which marooned mariners once clung for dear life have served as perches for cormorants, makeshift targets for naval ships' crews keen to polish their gunnery skills and as an impromptu lookout point for wildlife enthusiasts anxious to observe the sandbank's burgeoning seal population.

One among the latter was Percy Trett, diver, naturalist and EDP columnist, who contrived to guide me on the first leg of my island-hopping odyssey around Norfolk by introducing me to the strangely beguiling ways of a sandbank that has yielded unexpected riches and bizarre harvests, as well as providing literary inspiration and more practical benefits as a natural breakwater that has protected Yarmouth from the worst ravages of storm-driven seas and made possible its enduring status as one of Britain's premier seaside resorts.

Now in his 80s, Percy is one of Scroby's most adventurous and persistent explorers. He has recorded the life patterns of the island's seal colonies and he has scoured the seabed all around it in search of wrecks. He has even spent a night out there, camping beneath a canopy of stars, a boat propped up with oars as shelter while the sea gently lapped the shore.

"You could see everything in the open sky so clearly because there was no light pollution out there," he says wistfully. "You know there's no stones out there. Just pure, very fine sand that's built up on a ridge of boulder clay left over from the last ice age.

"If you walk over it on a summer's day when the sand is bare, and it used to be bare all the time, and you drag your foot the sand squeaks. You may have heard of the singing sands of the Kalahari and the Sahara. Well, when the wind blows, the quartz crystals in the sand vibrate and whistle and it was just the same on Scroby. It's a most eerie sound."

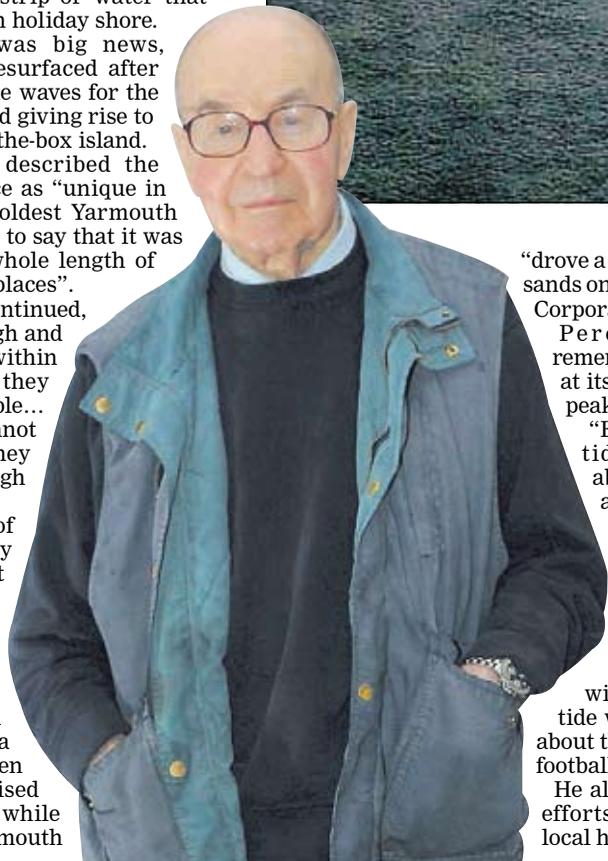
Percy first heard Scroby's strange cry between the two world wars when he ventured out across the narrow strip of water that separates sandbank from holiday shore.

Back then, Scroby was big news, having only recently resurfaced after disappearing beneath the waves for the best part of 340 years and giving rise to its nickname as Jack-in-the-box island.

A newspaper report described the sandbank's re-emergence as "unique in the recollection of the oldest Yarmouth inhabitant" and went on to say that it was possible to "walk the whole length of the sands except in odd places".

"Forsomemonths," it continued, "the sands have been high and dry but it has only been within the last fortnight that they have become approachable... They are so high one cannot see over the top, and they are always dry, even at high water."

Such was the level of excitement generated by the return of Scroby it became the setting for a bizarre little ceremony enacted on its sea-rimmed sands 90 years ago. It involved only the second recorded official visitation by a boatload of Port and Haven Commissioners who raised their flag on the island while the deputy mayor of Yarmouth



"drove a stake into the sands on behalf of the Corporation".

Percy Trett remembers Scroby at its 20th century peak.

"Even at high tide, it was about six foot above water in places," he says, "and at low tide it was about seven miles long and a mile wide. When the tide was in, it was about the size of two football pitches."

He also recalls the efforts made by a local headteacher to

establish marram on the island. "He took some out and planted it when Scroby was at its best," he says. "Marram's a great help in building up sand hills."

No such assistance was needed four centuries earlier when Sir Edward Clere, lord of the manor of nearby Scratby, laid mischievous claim to what was variously known as Scratby Sand and Yarmouth Island.

The marram-covered sand hills which were freckled with stunted trees had been controversially annexed by Yarmouth in 1578. But what might appear a farcical piece of empire-building was anything but. This was a land grab with commercial gain in mind.

At that time, and for years after, the straggling sandbank less than two miles from the mainland was a major centre of salvage from the myriad wrecks that found their misguided way on to the treacherous island. Not for nothing did Scroby become known locally as "Treasure Island".

Its value was out of all proportion to its sandy acreage, which is why Queen Elizabeth I's new knight of the realm rejected as "nonsense" the

borough's assertion and insisted: "The Sands and all found thereon are mine".

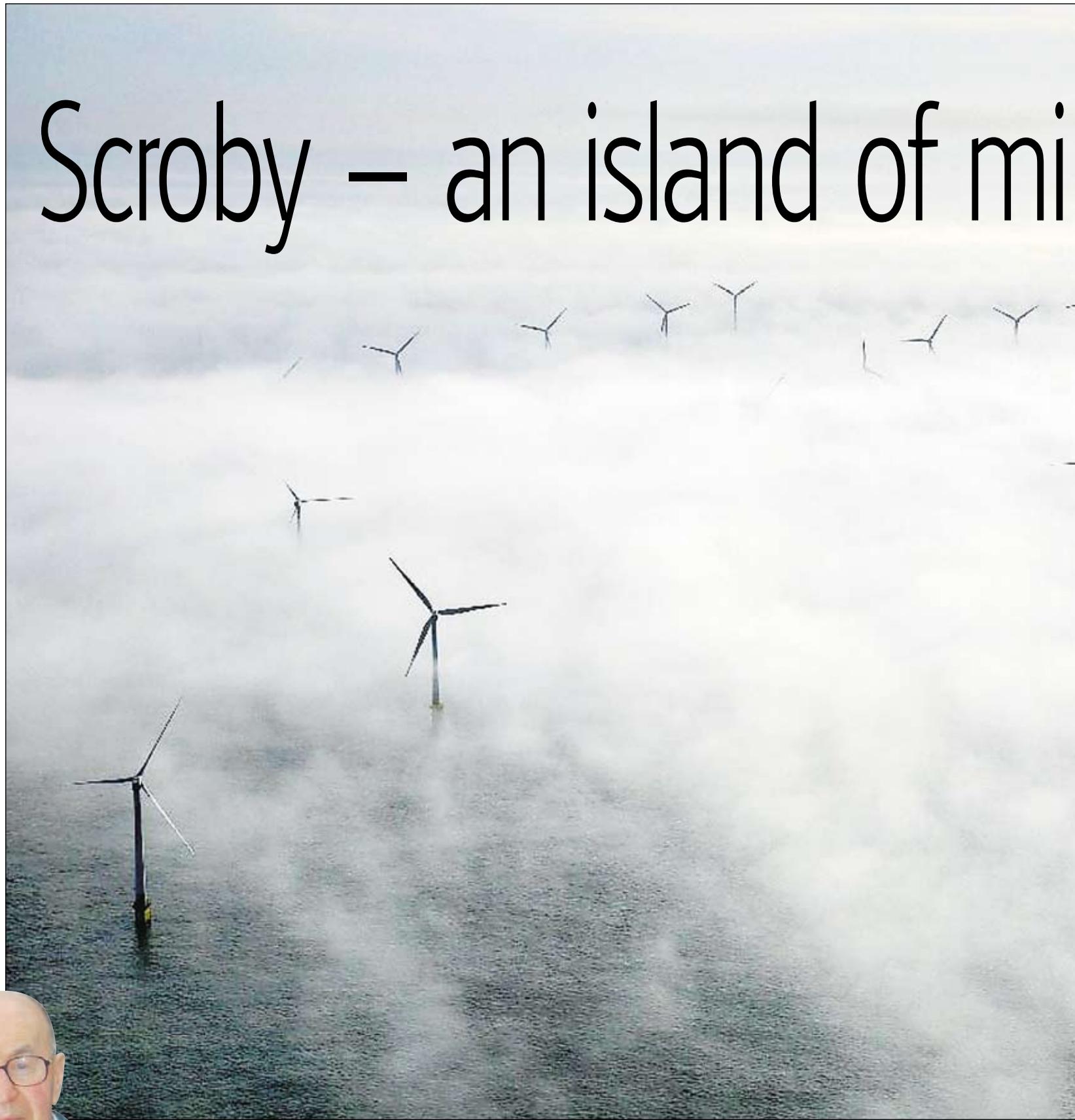
The battle for salvage rights appeared destined for a protracted court hearing until nature took the law into its own destructive hands. Four years after the bailiff of Yarmouth laid claim to Scroby, a fearful storm swept across the sand hills and when calm returned the island had disappeared beneath the waves, its ownership issue still unresolved.

The case having been wound up or, more accurately, washed away, Scroby remained largely hidden from view until her unexpected reappearance during the first world war. Being out of sight, however, did not mean being out of mind. For Scroby remained a perpetual nuisance and occasional menace to mariners throughout its 'lost' years.

Then, as now, the sandbank was a place to be avoided, though fog and gale frequently played havoc with the best intentions of even the most diligent navigators.

That literary traveller Daniel Defoe wrote of one such storm that blew up from nowhere and laid waste to around 140 colliers from a fleet

Scroby – an island of mi



history and nature of these tiny specks of land. First stop is that ships' graveyard known as Scroby Sands.

sadventure

Pictures: MIKE PAGE/EDP ARCHIVE



Main picture: Mike Page's atmospheric aerial shot of the wind turbines rising through the sea mist at Scroby Sands.

Above, the Danish motor torpedo boat beached for six weeks in 1952.

Left, the crew of submarine D5 which sank after being mined off Scroby.

Below, holidaymakers embark on a sea trip to Scroby in 1973.

Below left, setting off to release seal pups on Scroby in 1964.

Inset, far left, naturalist and diver Percy Trett has been a persistent explorer at Scroby.



200-strong, dashing their powerless hulls to destruction along the coast and neighbouring sands. Another convoy of merchant vessels was similarly reduced to driftwood, leaving a total death toll bordering the thousand mark and a shore strewn with the wreckage of nigh on 200 vessels.

Some 47 years later that terrible gale provided the tempestuous backdrop for the opening drama of one of the English language's best-known yarns, Robinson Crusoe, in which the world's most famous castaway was forced to take to a lifeboat after his ship foundered off Winterton.

Not all seafarers whose ships fouled Scroby's underwater sandbank were as fortunate. Down the years, Scroby was the scene of many a tragic disaster and heroic rescue.

As a diver, Percy Trett has witnessed firsthand the sunken remains of numerous vessels that came to grief on those sands, barely two miles from land.

"There's the wreck of a ship called the Egyptian," he says, "and a trawler called the Yarmouth and many more besides. Do you

realise, on one night when they relied on sea power, there were more than a hundred vessels lost off the coast of east Norfolk. There were a lot of widows and orphans in the town then."

The image painted is of a seabed strewn with the ghostly remnants of history's luckless fleet, but not all the disasters can be laid at Scroby's door. Percy tells of the shattered wreck of the submarine D5 which lies in deeper water on the far side of the sandbank.

"In 1914, when the German battle fleet came and shelled Yarmouth, we sent out our main deterrent, a fishery protection vessel called the Halcyon. She got shot up and so we sent out an armed trawler. We were hopeful in those days. That got shot up as well, so they decided to send out the D class submarines from the harbour. They went out full of fire and fury, but when they got there the German fleet had gone, but they left behind some mines and the D5 struck one and went down. Her bows were blown off and she is out there, on the outside of Scroby."

Others were more fortunate. The crew of the Hopelyn clung to their grounded ship even as it broke up beneath them and in an epic of

lifeboat valour were saved.

And the crew of a Danish motor torpedo boat were similarly lucky as, indeed, was the craft itself which was eventually refloated following six weeks of salvage work.

Such unscheduled visits to Norfolk's coastal sandbanks have occasionally left rich pickings beyond the usual salvage rights and none more so than the bizarre, though much-appreciated, orange bounty which followed in the wake of the SS Bosphorus' bump on to the Haisbro' Sands in the winter of 1948.

Forced to jettison her cargo in order to float clear, local people, many of whom hadn't seen an orange in years due to the second world war let alone tasted one, found the shore speckled with them, while caseloads of the fruit littered Scroby before finding their way into nearby homes in time for Christmas.

The previous year, Scroby Sands had been the scene of another invasion, this time by local boatmen and around 150 passengers protesting about a Ministry of Transport ban on the resumption of summer pleasure trips to the 'island'.

Government officials insisted that the "shifting sands" were too dangerous to set foot on and the tourist trips were "undesirable" and to be "discouraged". But the beach boatmen under the redoubtable leadership of their secretary Sid Gibbs were not to be deterred.

The defiant flotilla sailed out with flags flying and, despite being dive-bombed by the occasional angry seabird, were soon in occupation.

"Lady invaders were carried ashore by sturdy boatmen," wrote an EDP reporter who joined them. "Then we sat in deck chairs on a sunlit summer evening and waved to a couple of aircraft carrying photographers from the national newspapers. We even played bowls and cricket."

Along with the seals, the men from the ministry beat a hasty retreat and the trips to Scroby became a continuing feature of the Yarmouth holiday season.

Tourists apart, the most frequent visitors to Scroby Sands over the past 90 years have been the birds and seals which make their temporary home there.

Since 1947, sandwich and common terns have nested there with varying degrees of success, while seals began colonising Scroby almost as soon as the sands resurfaced towards the end of the first world war.

It was the seals, originally thought to be offspring of The Wash population, that lured Percy Trett out to spend a night on the sands.

"I wanted to record them singing," says Percy, "and after a bit I managed it, though the first time I went I managed to forget my microphones."

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These days Scroby's sands have shrunk from their heyday, having, at one point, almost disappeared again.

"The 1953 surge, which brought so much flooding to the coastal communities, was the worst moment," says Percy. "The tide flowed right through the centre, splitting the island in half and it has never fully recovered."

Today, the sands remain a rich source of wildlife, with some 120 common seals as more or less permanent residents and a fluctuating community of Atlantic greys and an assortment of birds. But concerns about their future have been heightened since Scroby underwent the greatest transformation in its eventful and somewhat chequered history.

The establishment of a wind farm, with its 30 turbines capable of powering more than 30,000 local homes, has provided Yarmouth with an altogether different kind of visitor attraction, but one which has brought with it environmental worries that could yet bring more change to the shifting sands of Norfolk's most technologically advanced island.

Contrary to some reports which claim that the turbines provide a sanctuary for fish spawning and protection from intensive fishing, there are those who fear the wind farm is having an adverse affect on fish stocks.

"From what I've been told," says Percy, "you can hear the turbines humming under water and sound travels very, very fast through water. We think it's driving the fish away and, given the fish are what the seals eat and what inshore fishermen hunt for a living, it could have a damaging effect on both."

For now, the jury is out on the impact of Scroby's latest incarnation, but as Percy puts it: "We live in interesting times..."

For more pictures relating to Scroby Sands log on to www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle