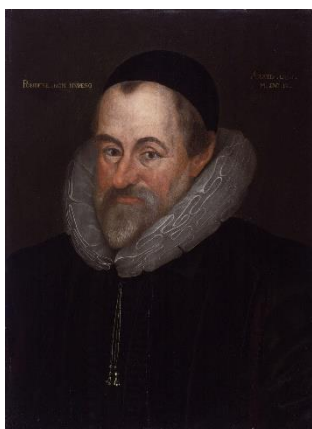


## Elegugs & The Harry Bird

This interesting piece exists in the Society Archives, but is not attributed to a society member, and we would be grateful if anyone can advise of its origin so that we can provide the proper attributes. The background is given in the first paragraph, and 'Britannia' (mentioned below) was this country's first chorographical book.



NICHOLAS ROBERTS was vicar of Llandeni Velfrey from 1673 until his death in 1707. He had graduated BA in 1668 from Jesus College, Oxford, and MA in 1671, and in 1672 had been licensed to be Schoolmaster of the Free School in Carmarthen. He also became Rector of Nolton in 1679 and had two other livings. From 1687 onwards he corresponded with EDWARD LHUYD (1660-1709), Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum and Library in Oxford, who was preparing new Welsh sections for revised editions of William Camden's *Britannia* being organised by Dr Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London. Lhuyd was seeking historical and archaeological records, and data on natural history, and he acquired informants from all over Wales – about a dozen letters from Roberts to Lhuyd are preserved in the Bodleian Library – but many more of Lhuyd's papers are lost.

Nic Roberts' first letter to him, dated 12<sup>th</sup> August 1687, excuses his own lack of progress in providing specimens, as due to "the violent storms in the Spring, the principall time for Birds, & vegetables, so that no boats would venture to the rocks beyond St David's Island" (a rare Englishing of *Ynys Dewi*, Ramsey Island). He had intended to send Lhuyd an entire lobster shell, as moulted by its owner, but it had been trodden on by one of the boatmen. Would a "sea calf skin" (a sealskin) be acceptable? Letters to him "at Landeny Velfrey to be left at the Greyhound in Haverfordwest".

I add part of a Letter from my ingenious Friend, the Reverend Mr. Nicholas Roberts, A. M. Rector of Lhan Ddewi Velfrey, which contains an account of some migratory Sea-birds that breed in the Isle of Ramsey.

To this Island, Ramsey and some rocks adjoining, call'd by the sea-men The Bishop and his Clerks, do yearly resort about the beginning of April such a number of birds of several sorts, that none but such as have been eye-witnesses can be prevail'd upon to believe it; all which, after breeding here, leave us before August. They come to these rocks, and also leave them, constantly in the night-time: for in the evening the rocks shall be cover'd with them, and the next morning not a bird to be seen; so in the evening not a bird shall appear, and the next morning the rocks shall be full. They also visit us commonly about Christmas, and stay a week or more, and then take their leave till breeding-time. Three sorts of these Migratory birds are call'd in Welsh, Mora, Poeth-wy, and Pâl; in English, Eligug, Razorbil, and Puffin; to which we may also add the Harry-bird; though I cannot at present assure you, whether this bird comes and goes off with the rest.

The Eligug lays but one egg; which (as well as those of the Puffin and Razorbil) is as big as a Duck's, but longer, and smaller at one end. From this egg she never parts (unless forced) till she hatches it, nor then till the young one be able to follow her; being all the while fed by the male. This and the Razorbil breed upon the bare rocks, making no manner of nest; and sometimes in such a place, that being frighten'd thence, the egg or young one (which before was upheld by the breast, upon a narrow shelving rock) tumbles into the sea. The Puffin and Harry-bird breed in holes, either those of Rabbits (wherewith Ramsey is abundantly furnish'd, all black) or such as they dig with their beaks. The Harry-birds are never seen on land, but when taken; and the manner of taking these and the Puffins, is commonly by planting nets before their berries, wherein they soon entangle themselves. These four sorts cannot raise themselves upon the wing, from the land; but, if at any distance from the cliffs, waddle (for they cannot be well said to go, their legs being too infirm for that use, and placed much more backward than a Duck's, so that they seem to stand upright) to some precipice, and thence cast themselves off, and take wing: but from the water they will raise to any height. The Puffin lays three white eggs; the rest but one, speckled, &c.

To the above extract from Nicholas Roberts' letter is added some additional information from the unknown writer.



THE ELIGUG-STACK, near ST GOVAN'S HEAD, SOUTH PEMBES drawn by the artist-engraver WILLIAM DANIELL in the summer of 1813 and published as an aquatint 1814

*'Elegug is an old name for the guillemot, used, it is said, to mimic their sound (the Welsh is **heligog**). Thousands nest each year on the near-vertical cliffs on the back of the Island, standing in rows (each on their single 3" egg) crowded up to each other, on ledges, looking like penguins of the northern hemisphere. As Roberts noted, they really cannot take off from land. Many years ago I came across one bravely waddling South down the middle of Nun Street (this was before the one-way system) at pitch-dark midnight in a summer gale - it had been blown inland and then made a mistaken landing on the wet black tarmac,*

*thinking it was water. I grabbed it (they are called Silly Gillies because they are easy to catch) and returned it to Porth Clais, where it dived happily into the waves (having duly bitten me, as is the custom), and swam out to sea.*

*Nowadays the name elegug has dropped out of common usage and is only retained in the name of the Elegug Stacks in the South of the County, the remains of the remarkable rock drawn by Daniell, well-known to rock-climbers (the term 'Elegug' can also apply to the razorbill, another member of the Auk family).*

*The Harry Bird was the **shearwater** – this Harry Bird name has disappeared also, and I don't know its origin.'*



They are long-lived birds. A Manx shearwater breeding on Copeland Island, Northern Ireland, is currently (2003/2004) the oldest known wild bird in the world: ringed as an adult (at least 5 years old) in July 1953, it was re-trapped in July 2003, at least 55 years old. Manx shearwaters migrate over 10,000 km (6,200 mi) to South America in winter, using waters off southern Brazil and Argentina, so this bird has covered a minimum of 1,000,000 km (620,000 mi) on migration alone.



Their nests were often raided by hunters in the breeding season as the single chick can easily be caught in the burrow; the parents do not stay with the chicks overnight. Skokholm and Skomer have large and internationally important colonies. The birds may travel up to 1000 km away from the nest on a feeding trip during the breeding season

**Paul Edey**