

# Sun, Shingle And Seals

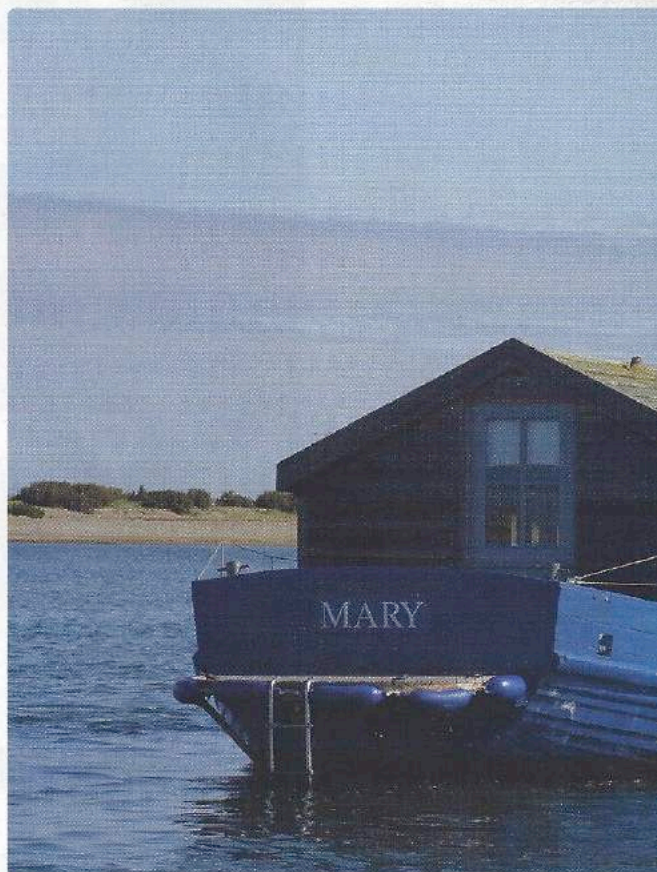
Whilst in East Anglia with 'George', his trusty T6 camper, Mike Trippitt goes looking for seals along the shores of north Norfolk and finds Mr. Bean  Mike Trippitt

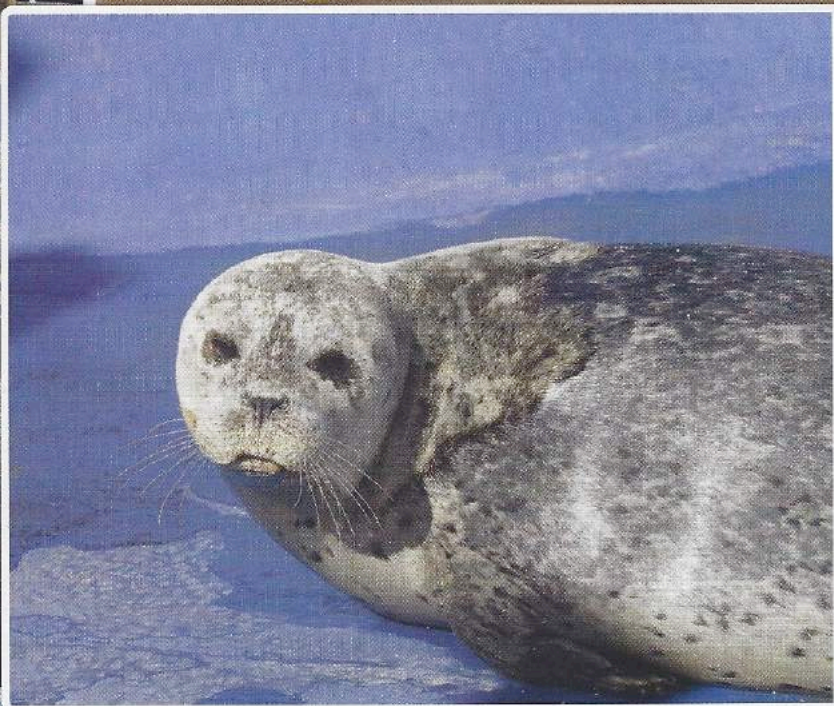
**S**ome seals get a bad deal. In the sea sharks and whales predate them. On land hunters club them to death. In captivity they are made to perform unnaturally for our entertainment and around our shores, they are injured and endangered by humans and our plastic.

Since my teenage years, when television footage brought the scourge of seal pup culling to a world audience, I've had an affection for these ungainly, though cute, animals. So, whilst in Norfolk with my campervan 'George', I decided to take a trip out to Blakeney Point to see seals in their natural, undisturbed environment.

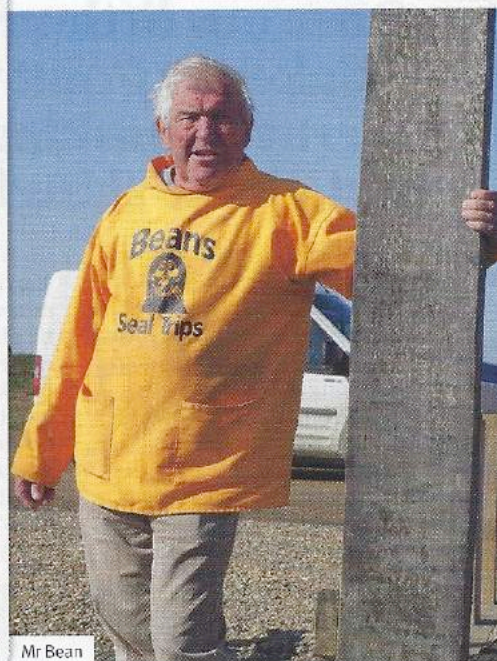
We were staying at Burnham Deepdale Backpackers site. It's halfway between Hunstanton and Wells-next-the-Sea on the

A149, and a great base from which to explore the beaches, creeks, footpaths and villages of north Norfolk. But before heading out in a boat, we went to Hunstanton. On the resort's seafront, facing out over The Wash towards Lincolnshire, Hunstanton Sea Life's seal hospital has been nursing seals back to health for thirty years. "They do some amazing work here with seals," says aquarist, and captive animal keeping graduate, Nicky Nelson. Her Antipodean accent is a long way from a local, clipped Norfolk lilt. "I actually moved over here to work with seals. They are my passion. There are more places here where you can work with seals than in Australia, and I ended up at Hunstanton Sea Life. If you wanted someone to talk about seals, you've probably got the person who loves them most!"

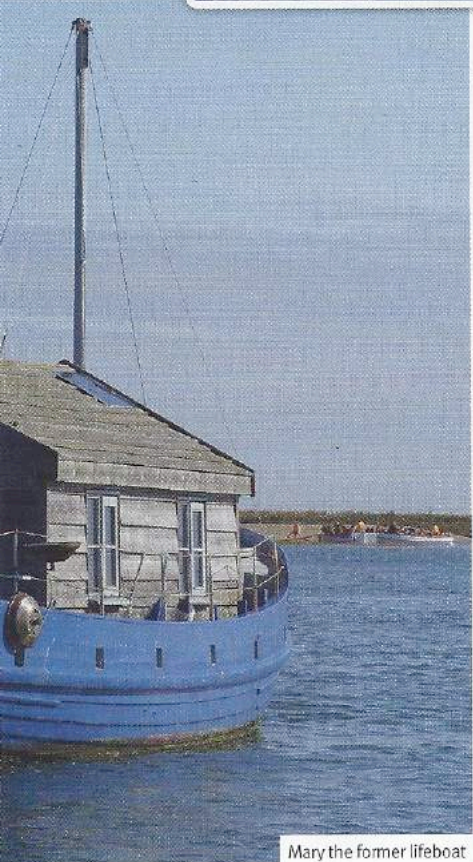




George at Blakeney



Mr Bean



Mary the former lifeboat

### What You Need To Know

Seals give birth to one pup at a time. Grey seal pups are born in the winter months on the beaches. They weigh about 10 kg at birth. Common Seal pups are born in the water in the summer months and weigh about 6 kg when born. Blakeney Point is the largest seal colony in England.

## So many seals need rescuing, especially due to human interference

Two species of seal naturally live in the waters of the UK: The Grey seal, and the smaller Common, or Harbour seal. Both are native to Norfolk, with populations living from as far north as the rivers and creeks around The Wash, to Great Yarmouth in the south. But Nicky says that it is not just from local shores that seals are brought in. "It's from all over. We have some amazing rescue groups that we work with. We've even had seals come all the way up from Hull and Scotland, because hospitals have been so full all around the UK this year." Nicky says that Sea Life takes in abandoned or injured seal pups, both Common seals and Grey seals, and "treats and rehabilitates them", so that they can be released back out into the wild to "live on for years to come. It's a really big issue at the

moment," she says. "So many seals need rescuing especially due to human interference and dog attacks, and especially with so much of the plastic pollution out in the oceans. There is so much intake needed, we've had a lot transferred down to us when we've actually had the space."

Nicky's words "human interference" and "dog attacks" worry me. I'm enlightened, but remained concerned, by what she says: "A lot of times people really do mean well when they see a seal pup on the beach. They automatically think that seals should be in water, but seals are actually mammals. The mother will go out fishing for hours at a time, so she can come back and give her pup milk."

"If we go up and touch a pup, we leave our scent on it, so when



Beans Boats and Morston Quay

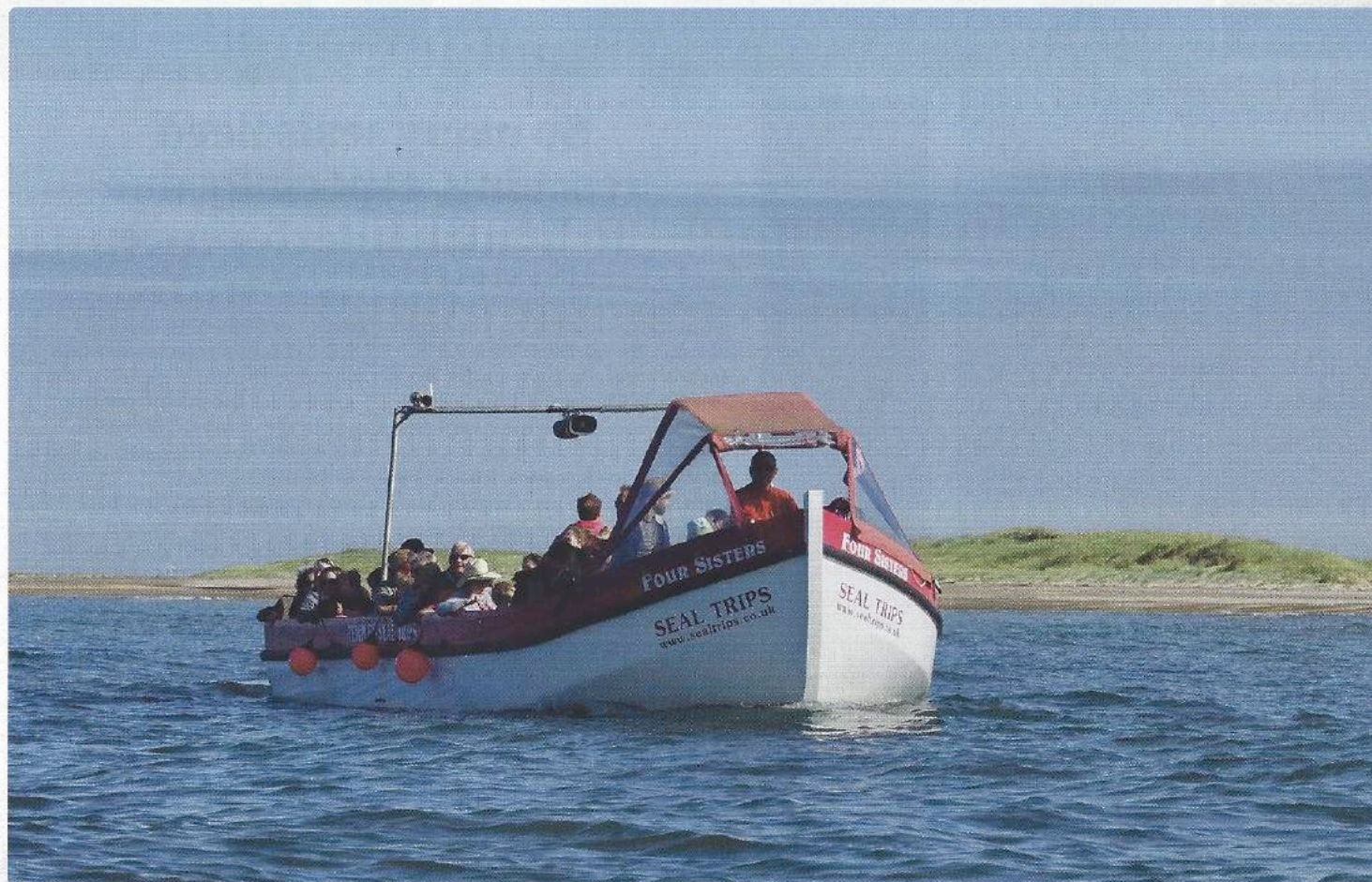
## Once our little craft reaches Blakeney Point we find an array of basking seals laid out on the shingle before us

the seal comes back it might not recognize it. If we huddle around a pup, the mother will see a bunch of strange people standing around it and be too scared to return. So, she abandons it." Dog owners are also well meaning and don't deliberately let their animals harm seals. But, says Nicky: "Dogs are always going to be the first on a beach to find a seal, because seals have a very distinct smell and

dogs have a very strong nose. Movies portray seals as sea dogs or seal puppies that can really be playful. Seals are actually incredibly aggressive. They can be playful and curious when they want to be, but when a dog is bothering them, not only is the dog a danger to the seal, the seal is actually quite a danger to the dog. They have a horrible bite and carry really harmful diseases."

Since opening, Sea Life has rescued over 750 seals, and 50 from Norfolk and surrounding counties in the last twelve months alone. Their mothers have abandoned some of those just because humans have got too close. Nicky's plea is clear: "Watch from a distance".

So, when I head out on Beans Seal Trips' vessel 'Seafarer' into the blue rising tide of Blakeney Harbour, I know I'll be taking pictures of seals from a safe distance: a job for a telephoto lens. On my arrival at Morston Quay bathed in crisp morning sunshine, a friendly-looking man is tending his boats. "Are you Mr. Bean?" "I am," says Graham Bean of Beans Seal Trips. "And are you





A seal trip boat and Blakeney Point



The Sea Life centre at Hunstanton



## I feel transported into their world. This is their home, their environment. We are merely privileged visitors

the boss?" "They say I am," he says with a smile. "Though they keep telling me I should retire!" Graham is instantly likeable, and happy to talk. The Bean family have been running ferries and seal boats to Blakeney Point since the 1930s, and along with three other family run businesses take increasing number of visitors on the hour-long trip around Blakeney Harbour to the seals. Although the sail trip businesses advertise at Blakeney Quay the little boats now ply from Morston Quay, one-and-a-half miles up the road. "We used to run out of Blakeney, but the harbour has silted up so much," says Graham. "We have a very short window up at Blakeney, about two hours altogether, so we've all shifted

to Morston where we have got about four hours of tide."

Graham tells me that on the trip today we will see Common seals, but Blakeney is now getting a lot of Grey seals: "Last year there were just over 3000 pups. So, at Christmas time there were probably six or seven thousand seals here. The pups are weaned at about two months, so by January they are ready to go." Each year Grey seals and their young pups make for the Fjords in Norway where herring are spawning. But they then make their way back down the North Sea to Norfolk. "They follow the herring and any other fish that come down this way, just like our fishing fleets used to do years ago," says Graham. "It's



Advertising at Blakeney Quay

## The seals are unconcerned by our presence. They ignore our flotilla of seal trip boats

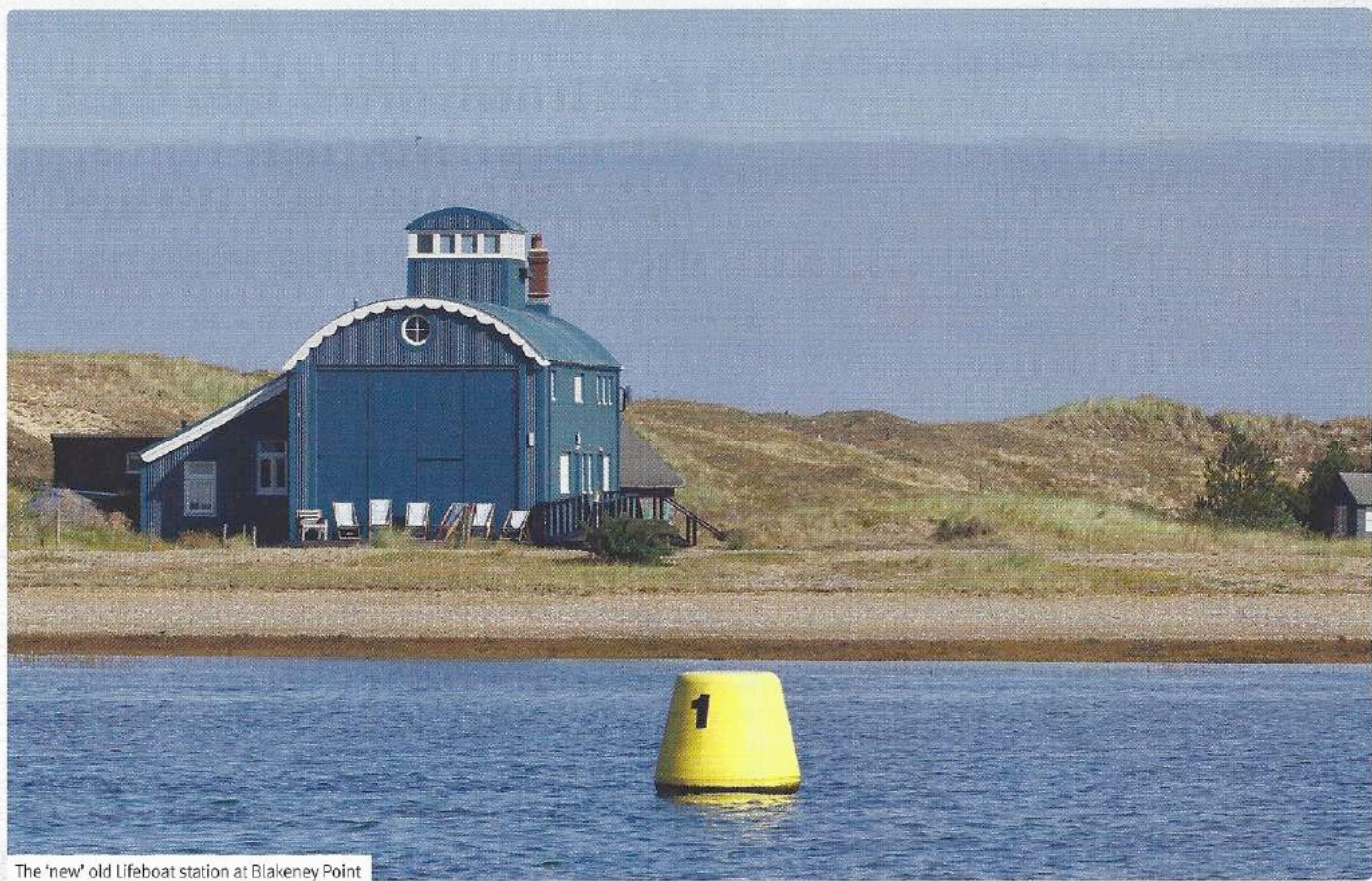
a bit like us really. We know our roots. We go off and then come back. They do the same."

I join helmsman John and crewman Norman on 'Seafarer' as the boat leaves the quay and chugs out into the calm waters. Blakeney's natural harbour lies behind a spit of land formed by longshore drift: sand and shingle eroded from the cliffs at

Great Yarmouth is deposited at Blakeney by wind and tide. The landscape changes constantly. Blakeney Point moves westwards by one metre each year. Though our purpose today is to see seals, the boat trip alone is fascinating. Norman's commentary is both interesting and informative, and he teaches a simple way to remember the species: "Grey



Basking at Blakeney Point



The 'new' old Lifeboat station at Blakeney Point



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seals look like a dog and Common seals look like a cat. 'C' for cat and 'C' for Common." We pass Blakeney's old lifeboat stations. There was an operational lifeboat here between 1820 and 1935, but harbour silting caused its closure when launching the boat within the four hours required became impossible. The lifeboat did however save 100 lives, and both the 'old' and 'new' lifeboat houses stand to this day. Norman draws passengers' attention to a curious vessel anchored in the harbour. It has a black wooden shed-like top and a blue wooden hull. Norman says that 'Mary's' hull is "a former lifeboat from down the coast at Winterton" but is now a holiday home. The hull, he tells us, is 113 years old, and adds: "They really built them well in those days."

Once our little craft reaches Blakeney Point we find an array of basking seals laid out on the

shingle before us. It's a wonderful sight, and so rare to see so many seals at such close quarter. I feel transported into their world. This is their home, their environment. We are merely privileged visitors. The seals are unconcerned by our presence. They ignore our boat and the flotilla of seal trip boats out here. Ninety percent of a seal's time is spent hauled out basking on land. None shows any sign of doing anything energetic whilst we're watching.

With John at the helm our boat trundles back and forth parallel to the beach for a few minutes, before turning for home. As we head to Morston, hundreds of pairs of eyes look back at us, but hundreds more remain closed. Under Blakeney's blue sky, warm sun and in the gentle swell of an azure sea, there aren't many better places on earth for the seals or for me to be. ☺



### Blakeney Point Seal Trip Operators:

#### Beans Seal Trips

[www.beansboattrips.co.uk](http://www.beansboattrips.co.uk),  
01263 740505 and 01263 740038

#### Bishops Boats

[www.bishopsboats.co.uk](http://www.bishopsboats.co.uk), 01263 747753

#### Ptarmigan Blakeney Point Seal Trips

[www.blakeneypointsealtrips.co.uk](http://www.blakeneypointsealtrips.co.uk),  
01263 740792 and 07563 332088

#### Temples Seal Trips

[www.sealtrips.co.uk](http://www.sealtrips.co.uk), 01263 740791