

Letter from Lundy January 2009

The new season on Lundy has begun with a breezy but refreshing start to the year, with many bright sunny days and lots of excuses to get out and go for a walk!

At these more quiet times of the year out on the island you can feel like you're the only person here and that is particularly true during 'shutdown' on Lundy. This is when the island closes to visitors for the first two weeks in January and the islanders take the opportunity to complete maintenance tasks like painting properties and deep cleaning the Tavern which is open 24/7 normally - so this is the ideal opportunity.

It is far from a quiet time work wise as it's all hands to the pump to get the tasks complete before visitors return, but out on the island it's a different story. The windswept grasslands are home to only the hardiest animals and birds. The tough feral goats have started 'kidding' and the newborns are a delight to watch, gambolling and charging about without a care in the world. It's a harsh time of year to be born, but with mum able to feed well on meagre winter pickings she produces lots of rich milk and is a very attentive parent.

We saw lapwings at the beginning of January and live in hope that now we are rat free that they might return again one day to breed on the island. Golden plover, goldfinch, a firecrest and long tailed tits have also stopped over on their journeys, possibly blown off course by strong winds. Interestingly, a lone juvenile moorhen (which is a rare sight on Lundy) has formed a bond with the chickens on the island and is more than happy to feed from their food hopper! A nervous little bird, it never strays to far from cover and the security of a nearby pond - I'll keep you posted to see if it sticks around.

Guillemots have been visiting the sheer ledges of the west coast, braving the high seas and crashing waves. It is a sign that the breeding season is on its way. They are visiting temporarily until April when they will settle and breed. At the moment though, they are stocking up on food resources in preparation for breeding when both parents will share the exhausting task of raising a chick.

Similarly we on the island are trying to stock up for the season. But naturally we have to order our everyday supplies from the mainland and are usually crammed to the gunnels - however after the busy Christmas & New Year we had, and what with our supply ship being delayed in visiting, we have come dangerously close to running out of essentials like diesel, coal and worst of all, beer! Thankfully though our ship is scheduled to sail at the end of January when we can top up the island stocks and get back to normal once again.

Although it still feels quite winter-like and bleak, there are already signs of spring popping up. Daffodils are starting to poke their green shoots through the ground and I even saw a primrose in flower the other day. Soon the island will be turned upside down again by the arrival of the lambing season and before we know it we'll be welcoming day trippers to the island. Doesn't time fly!

Sophie Wheatley, Assistant Lundy Warden.

LETTER FROM LUNDY – FEBRUARY 2009

Springtime is my favourite season on Lundy and there are signs all around us which tell us it's well on its way! The westerly winds are easing, the breeze is warming and young green shoots are appearing all over the island, tiny indicators that new life is about to burst onto the scene. I saw my first snow drop the other day and the bluebells won't be far behind. But it's not just the flowers which are gearing up - the island is getting busier with feathered visitors as birds prepare for the breeding season, seemingly practicing their songs over and over, so they are sure to attract a mate.

Male skylarks have already begun their enchanting song flights. Tirelessly performing elaborate trills and impressive flight sequences – they soar high in the air then parachute glide to the ground. An impressive bid to establish territories and stake claim to areas of the island where they can woo the females for the coming breeding season. I never tire of listening to their melodious calls and come the peak season they can be heard literally all around the island – it is quite magical.

As the seas calm and quieten, we can turn our attention to marine life sightings again which often drop off throughout the winter as stormy seas and strong winds make spotting cetaceans (porpoises, dolphins & whales) quite difficult. Recently, a flurry of excitement occurred when what was thought to be a large cetacean, possibly a whale was seen in the Landing bay, but actually turned out to be a rather large bottlenose dolphin.

These glimpses of marine life remind me to get out and spend a bit of time just looking out to sea, scanning the waters – you never know what's out there. The majority of the sightings in the UK come from the public and it's important that if you encounter marine wildlife that you report it. Your sightings are really valuable and help to give us a better understanding of exactly what is around our coastline. Go online and report your sightings to the Sea Watch Foundation (www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk) who collate and report information about the UK marine wildlife - do your bit for wildlife research.

A good opportunity for a bit of wildlife watching is onboard the Oldenburg when sailing over to the island – she has recently made her maiden voyage of the year even though it was only a stores run to replenish the island stocks. She's currently being spruced up, painted and polished as the boat season is virtually upon us and soon we'll be welcoming her to our shores as often as four times a week throughout the summer. Hopefully this year we'll see some better weather and even more of you can enjoy our lovely island in the sunshine! Fingers crossed!

Sophie Wheatley
Assistant Warden

LETTER FROM LUNDY – APRIL 2009

It's amazing how quickly you slip back into a routine. The sailing season on Lundy has started and although the first boat was cancelled due to strong winds we've had a couple of really beautiful sunny boat days and the winter seems a mere distant memory now. It's great to have the island buzzing with chatter and see people enjoying themselves out in the sunshine – let's hope it lasts.

It's not just the humans basking in the fine weather, our new born lambs have been enjoying it too. Turned out in the sunshine they are hilarious to watch gambolling about in the fields, with gangly legs they haven't quite grown into. Our wild sheep, the 'soay' are lambing as well. But as soay are quite a primitive independent breed, they don't require any help and manage just fine on their own. The attentive mothers often take themselves off to a remote part of the island to give birth and will rejoin the herd when the lamb is strong enough to run with the others.

March and April are great months for bird watching on Lundy. The island provides an important staging post for many birds that are currently migrating from winter homes to their breeding grounds for the summer. The long distances many have to travel often mean that we get many different species stopping off here for a break. Lundy acts like a service station for birds. They can fill up on food, rest and recharge their batteries before moving on again. They generally don't stay very long, just long enough to refuel.

We have seen snow bunting, sand martin, a ring ouzel, song thrush, linnets, wheatear, swallows, goldfinch, willow warblers, goldcrest – to name just a few! Roughly 140 species of bird are recorded on the island each year and about 35 of those will stay to breed. So after the migration, the birds left on the island will be breeding and of course that includes our puffins.

I'm delighted to report that puffins have been seen back on the island again and at this time of year you can guarantee they will be the breeding adults. We should have a better idea of exactly how many are breeding by then end of the month, so I shall keep you updated. It's always a nervous time waiting to see how many have survived the winter out at sea and made it back to their breeding grounds – so it's a really positive sighting and now we just have to sit and wait to see if many more return.

As a warden on the island, it's a great time of year. The anticipation of the summer, days out on our boat patrolling the marine reserve, the bird breeding season and numerous surveys throughout the summer – it's a good time and needs very little excuse to get out and about. We have more warden events on offer too – walks, talks, rockpool rambles and snorkel safaris make up a large proportion of our week and they are great fun. Not only is it a good introduction to the wildlife of the island, especially if you are new to Lundy, but also might help you make the most of your visit – pointing out things you might otherwise over look.

On a walk recently I showed the group the remains of a bronze age settlement. Someone in the group who has visited on numerous occasions had no idea it existed and must have walked past it over hundred times! Which just goes to show how easy it is to miss things which are right under your nose! So if you are visiting Lundy and want a few pointers of what to look out for then why not join a warden led event – we would be happy to show you around.

Sophie Wheatley, Assistant Warden

Letter from Lundy – The Royal visit

Staying true to form time is passing like the wind over here on Lundy. The spring season is in full swing and we have already seen lots of visitors to the island helped no doubt by the good weather we've been having. All our visitors are equally important of course, but recently some have been more regal than others!

With over 30 years having passed since the last Royal visit, Lundy was well overdue for another. In 1977 the Queen, Prince Philip and her young sons made a brief stopover while on a visit to the southwest of Britain as part of the Silver Jubilee Tour. This time the Earl and Countess of Wessex landed on Lundy for a tour of the island and to meet the islanders.

It was a great day. A chance to show how Lundy works and why it's so special. Apart from a small entourage of Royal attendees and body guards, you wouldn't have guessed that very much out of the ordinary was happening as it was a relatively low key event. We only informed our staying visitors on the morning of the visit, however by the time they arrived a bustling throng had gathered in the tavern in anticipation of meeting the Royal couple. We realise that Royalty are used to more intense media attention and vast crowds but while visiting the island we wanted to maintain as much of a normal island working day as possible. After all that's our job and is what they were here to see - a day in the life of Lundy.

There was a lot to get through in the time available and although Lundy runs like a well oiled machine, it's only thanks to the people who work here that make it so. The schedule was regimented to the minute, however within half an hour of landing we were already running over time, what we had forgot to mention is that Lundy seems to run on its own time which is generally at a more relaxed pace!

First came the introduction to all the staff in the Tavern followed by a short talk about Lundy in general, the history, wildlife & unique private postal system, followed by a lunch of the islands own produce – Lundy game stew. Next came the tour of the village including the shop, workshop and recycling centre of which the Countess in particular was very interested to impart her knowledge and experience of wormeries. Something which Chris our ranger might now look into as an alternative way for dealing with island waste.

The highlight of the day for me however was the warden's walk, escorting the Earl and Countess on a short walk of the island to show them some of Lundy's natural features and wildlife. Taking in the east coast first we then crossed over to the west to highlight the striking differences between the two coasts and also try to find some of Lundy's infamous visitors. Puffins. A tall order even on a regular warden's walk, but today the normally elusive puffins were out on show – what a relief! They proved to be a real hit with the Royal couple and we all got a great view of these rare (to Lundy) clown like birds in their natural habitat.

A further stop allowed us to view peregrines and also a number of different seabirds which are currently nesting on the island at this time of year. During the walk we saw a lot of the islands wildlife and I hope gave them the chance to experience a snapshot of Lundy, it's dramatic scenery and unique inhabitants.

With the visit drawing to a close a quick stop at the Old Light, Lundy's oldest disused lighthouse which affords stunning views of the island and mainland on clear days. Then a stop at the church to sign our visitors book before heading back to the Tavern for tea and cake, just in time for the heavens to open, demonstrating very well how quickly the weather can change on Lundy.

Their last job of the day was to unveil a plaque to commemorate the visit and for us to thank them for visiting our island home. It was a fitting end to a busy but enjoyable day, the Earl and Countess made it very easy to carry on as normal and put everyone at ease with their friendly, easy-going manner.

It's hard to imagine that much of the scenery has changed since the teenage Earl of Wessex was last on the island in 1977. The faces are different, but the island will still be the same. Perhaps when another 30 years have passed, future Lundy staff will be welcoming another Royal visit – hopefully proudly showing them the unique beauty that we all enjoy today.

Sophie Wheatley
Assistant Lundy Warden

LETTER FROM LUNDY – SEPTEMBER 2009

The Manx Shearwater

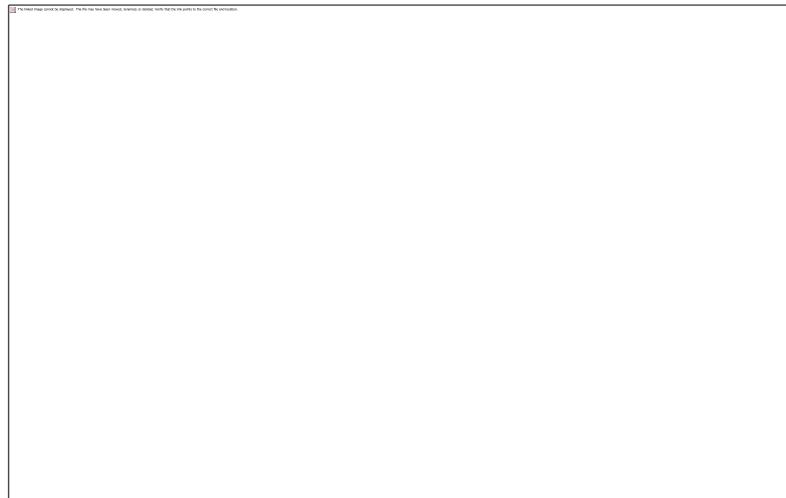
How many of you can honestly say you have heard of the **Manx Shearwater** – You may well have, with Lundy on your doorstep, but ask around, drop the name ‘Manx Shearwater’ into conversations and see how many respond with a blank look of bewilderment. You’ll be surprised to discover how few people have heard of these illusive creatures, especially when I tell you that 90% of the global population breed in the British Isles

So WHY haven’t we all heard of them and why are they not as well know as our other native species like the Robin? Everyone should know about these amazing British seabirds – their story is epic, but perhaps it is this wonderful, romantic, enduring tale and their incredible life cycle that is part of the reason they are little known outside the coastal areas they depend on.

So, let me tell you the ‘story’ of the Manx Shearwater.

Manx Shearwaters are true oceanic birds returning to the British Isles only to breed. Like puffins they nest in burrows in the ground and form monogamous life long pairs and as such have an incredible bond.

They return to the UK in early spring and as oceanic birds its somewhat understandable that they are nervous land dwellers and not too proficient at negotiating terra-firma. They will gather off shore in large groups (known as an ‘improbability’ of shearwaters) rafting on the sea patiently waiting for night fall when they can fly ashore without fear of predation.



Manx Shearwater – Shaun Barnes

As they fly in, in the dead of night they will call. Their cries have been likened to the call of the devil and Norse sailors once believed the call to be that of trolls who they thought occupied the Island of Rum!! You can hear the eerie call of a shearwater on the RSPB website:

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/m/manxshearwater/index.asp>

After a pair return and mate the female will leave the colony for up to 2 weeks, in order to feed and build up her energy for egg laying. Meanwhile, the male will remain close to the colony and ‘spring clean’ the burrow and nest chamber in preparation for her return..

A solitary egg is laid in mid May and the couple will take it in turns to incubate their egg for the next 7 weeks or so, never leaving it unattended. During this time one of the pair will leave the burrow to forage for food and will fly great distances, travelling as far as the Bay of Biscay, before returning to it's burrow days later to swap places with it's partner, who has been sitting tight in the nest chamber without food or daylight for up to 10 days!!

It is late June or July by the time the egg hatches and a chick emerges from it shelled swaddle, damp and defenceless. It needs constant attention at first and whilst one parent is on guard duty the other will be out at sea gathering fish. The delicate chick is unable to cope with raw fish so the foraging parent will consume all their catch at sea. When the time comes to return to the nest, it is the shearwaters equivalent of 'the changing of the guards'.

They will wait for darkness to descend, before flying in to land returning to their families under the relative safety of darkness. Once ashore the adult bird will fumble it's way to it's burrow to be reunited with it's chick and uncomplaining partner. Then they will swap duties and the returning adult will sit tight with the chick, periodically regurgitate it's partially digested fishy pulp for the tiny chick to feed; whilst it's partner ventures out to sea to stretch it's wings, shear the oceans waves and forage for more food.

By the time a chick has reached 7 days it is gaining in confidence and has become more alert and inquisitive, pecking at the ground of the burrow, nibbling it's feathers and even staggering a few short paces within the nest chamber. At this stage the chick can be left alone and will often spend the days in solitude only to be visited at night by a parent returning with food.

Over the following weeks the chick grows downy feathers and slowly gains size and weight, though on moonlit nights a chick will often have to endure days of fasting as the innate fear daylight predation is the same on clear summer moonlit night.

At 6 weeks old the chicks feathers begin to push through and the downy coverage begins to shed, the chick is now very fat and heavier than the parents. Late at night under the cover of darkness these pre-fledged chicks will begin to emerge from their burrows. Out of their burrow they will preen their new feathers and stretch their wings, these nightly adventures will continue as the chicks gain more feathers and gradually loose their infant down. It is about this time that the parents abandon their chick leaving it to fend for itself and without the provision of food the chick slowly begins to loose weight.

The parental birds will go their separate ways and depart the UK to begin their epic southern migration, flying across the Atlantic Ocean and heading south to Brazil and Argentina. In 2006 one adult male shearwater was tracked and made this astounding 7,750km journey in just 6 and a half days, averaging 1,200km per day. From the moment a shearwater leaves its breeding colony it will not touch land again until it returns to breed again the following year.

By the time the parents have reach their winter home in South America the abandoned chicks will be almost ready to fledge and follow their parents south. Now around 8 weeks old the chick is almost completely feathered and with just a few remnants of down on his thighs, neck and tail and his weight has fallen to that of an adult and they are ready to embark on this epic journey alone.

Lundy Shearwaters

Historically Lundy may have had thousands of breeding pairs, but in modern history the colony was in decline and by 2001 the island had less that 200 pairs – nesting in burrows they were under threat from predation and the main culprit was the infestation of island rats

brought to Lundy by human influence and threatening the very existence of these birds on Lundy.

Between 1975 and 2003 the island Shearwater surveys found not ONE chick, but the faithful adults still persisted, returning year after year to suffer the same fate. Imagine this parental bond, the devotion, and nurturing of these spectacular birds, returning year after year to produce a solitary chick. Then consider the turmoil and distress of having your egg or young chick snatched from your grasp by a stealthy rodent in search of food – Something had to be done to ensure the safeguard of this colony.

The 'Seabird Recovery Project' was launched in 2002, aka the rat eradication program. Many people are surprised to learn that this was put in place primarily for the Manx Shearwaters, after all, we are 'Puffin Island' and Puffins had been suffering a similar fate. But when you consider there are 23,000,000 puffins in the world, but just 600,000 Manx Shearwaters it is immediately apparent that on a global perspective it is the Shearwater that demands our attention!

The last confirmed rat sighting on Lundy was in February 2004 and in 2006 Lundy was officially declared rat free and whilst the eradication received mixed views it has proved to be a resounding success.

We have witness successful fledglings every year since 2004 and this year a survey found over 140 fledglings, an astounding turn around in their fate.

Without the presents of rats on the island Lundy has become prime real estate and it would seem that word is getting around. A shearwater census took place in 2008 and found we now have over 1000 breeding pairs on the island, a massive increase on the pre-rat eradication population, which far exceeded out greatest expectations.

Manx shearwaters live for a very long time. In 1953 a breeding adult was fitted with a unique id ring on Copeland Island, 50 years later in 2003, the same bird was re-trapped, still alive and still breeding at the grand age of at least 55. The adults do not begin breeding until they are at least 5 years old so the increase in our population must be down to some immigration from neighbouring colonies, as our young fledglings that have departed Lundy since the rat eradication have still not reach breeding age.

So it comes to now September 2009. It is at this time of year this years chicks will finally be ready to fledge the nest and leave Lundy, long after their feathered counterparts, the puffins who all departed this fare isle weeks ago. Little is known about the journey of the young shearwater chick, but it is certain it will not be returning to Lundy for many months and probably years.

But return they will, with partner's of their own to breed and raise their own broods for many years to come.

So for now, we bid farewell, until next year when our shores will once again be graced by an 'improbability' of shearwaters who will yet again face the challenges of chick rearing and will in all likeliness succeed in fledging a new youngster with a prosperous future. So long as Lundy remains rat free, who knows, 50 years from now maybe some of our fresh faced fledglings will be still be returning to Lundy having reared many young of their own to continue the future generations of Lundy's Manx Shearwaters.

Nicola Saunders
Lundy Warden

Letter from Lundy November 2009

True to form time is flying on Lundy and it's hard to remember what the summer felt as we are battered by howling gales and torrential rain. We are well into the Helicopter season which normally signals the quieter time of year on Lundy. The island has a feel that it has gone into hibernation when it's blowing a hooley with people tucking themselves away in the cosy warmth of their cottages or in the Tavern in front of the log fire.

It's a time of change for everyone as our roles alter slightly to adapt to the changing seasons. On busy days islanders become helicopter ground crew and people are set to work where they are most needed. It's the same for the wardens too. At this time of year as we take a back step from welcoming the Oldenburg, rhodi bashing becomes a high priority. As we are only allowed to clear rhododendron from September to March to avoid disturbing nesting birds it's a matter of getting as much done as possible in the time available. We have seen lots of volunteers this season already and have a packed schedule of clearance from January onwards.

It is also a time of year when the wardens visit the mainland for school visits and as I write this I am preparing for just that. I will be visiting a number of schools in North Devon to talk about Lundy and its wildlife hoping to inspire local children to explore the wealth of wildlife that is on their doorstep. Lundy is living proof that you don't have to go far to experience extraordinary wildlife and this autumn on Lundy has been another fine example.

The sika deer stags are looking healthy and proud as they are at their peak of fitness for the yearly rut, often seen standing at the cliff tops surveying their territories. The female goats are looking round and plump ready to give birth in February and the Soay sheep fat from a summer of rich grass are thriving – a hardy breed perfectly suited for Lundy's harsh environment.

Although we are miles from the mainland Lundy still provides an important service station for birds on migration and many stop over to take advantage of the islands food stocks. Throughout autumn birds worldwide have been travelling the globe moving from their breeding grounds to where they will spend the winter months. Many turn up on Lundy having travelled from the colder north. This includes numerous redwing and fieldfares from Scandinavia and recently eight whooper swans from Iceland arrived rather spectacularly.

I watched their graceful arrival while rhodi clearing on the east sidelands slightly bemused at seeing a group of large birds in perfect flight formation heading for the island. We were lucky enough to be given a close up view as they came in circling overhead in preparation for landing at pondsbury our largest lake where they stayed for a few weeks. It was a real treat and a record number of whooper swans recorded on Lundy. They fed up on the plants and grasses before taking flight again and heading for the mainland – maybe Lundy was a little too exposed for them!

Numerous other birds species have been recorded this year and if you enjoy bird watching then spring or autumn is a good time to visit the island, often rewarding us with a number of unusual sightings. Over winter however it is very much a different scene with all the animals and birds on the island heading for cover on the windiest of days. I think that we would do well to follow suit, staying wrapped up and cosy in front of the fire sounds like a good way to spend the winter to me!

Sophie Wheatley, Assistant Warden

Christmas Letter from Lundy

As I write this letter, on 21st December, the mainland stands proud on the horizon with some of the best visibility I've seen all year. In the North there are crisp winter views of Wales from Pembrokeshire in the west stretching east up the Bristol Channel towards Swansea. In the South the Cornish coast falls away from our visibility, but travelling east Morwenstow looks a mere stones throw away and beyond Woolacombe we can see the snow topped peaks of the Exmoor hills. It is a wonderful winters day and the views are truly spectacular!!

The snow is a reminder that Christmas is nearly upon us and Lundy is beginning to feel festive. Our Christmas visitors will arrive on Lundy by helicopter tomorrow and will be greeted in the Tavern with mulled wine and mince pies.

The twenty first of December may seem a little late to be starting to think about Christmas, but without the mainland stimulation, the Christmas lights and the advertising, we are completely lacking in the pre-Christmas hype and Christmas on Lundy has a habit of creeping up on us unaware.

This is part of it's charm and in many respects it makes the days celebrations all that more special. In the lead up to Christmas the islanders go about their day to day jobs without the stresses and pressures of the Christmas preparations. My first inkling that Christmas was upon us was on Thursday 17th, when some of the staff gathered in the Tavern to decorate the tree, the fire was roaring and there was much joviality. I could here the laughter filtering up the stairs to my office and I couldn't resist a peek. I snuck down the back stairs to take a look; And there it was, our Christmas had arrived, the tavern transformed into a beautifully traditional den of festivity, albeit modest.

The Lundy way of life is modest, and compared to the mainland it often seems as if you have stepped back to simpler times gone by, but life on Lundy today is far more comfortable and reliable than it once was. We do still get stranded, with rough weather and strong winds preventing boat sailings and helicopters, but these occurrences are few and far between these days and can often cause delight and excitement as opposed to hardship.

In 1961, it was a different story! The weather leading up to Christmas was particularly bad and there had been no mail brought to the island for over a week and they found themselves without gifts or turkey, one islander said "It looked certain that Christmas Dinner would be tinned Sausages". But the BBC and RAF Chivenor felt the plight of the stranded islanders and joined forces to mounted a relief expedition on Christmas Day. There is an account from Felix Gade, the island manager at the time; "The weather was atrocious, the wind due east, and gale force, with ten-tenths low cloud cover, so one 'chopper' brought the mails and turkey, and another came to help in case of accident"

I have found no account of the islanders reaction, but having lived on Lundy now for four years and having experienced the trepidation of waiting for the weather to turn to enable a sailing or helicopter's arrival, I can imagine the excitement of such a unique and delightful Christmas delivery that would equal that of Father Christmas himself. Indeed, maybe it was his intervention that bought such charitable relief!

Fifty years on we are not expecting such drama, Christmas lunch will take place in the traditional Lundy fashion, visitors will gather for lunch in the Tavern and all the staff will

muck in together. The chef, Tom will be busy in the Kitchen with all the Tavern staff, Grant the barman will be serving drinks and we might find a maintenance man posing as a wine waiter for the day and a housekeeper or possibly a warden as a waitress!?

After a hard days work all the staff come together to wash dishes and clean up as the visitors retire to their holiday properties. Christmases have always been communal on the island, it is the chance for all the staff to come together as a family and celebrate, and with the Tavern closed to visitors for just this **one** night of the year, our Christmas party will finally begin.

By the time this letter reaches your doorsteps the Christmas festivities will be drawing to a close and we will all be looking to the New Year and the start of a new decade. So with Christmas now passed for another year, we all wish you a Happy New Year and a wonderful start to 2010

“All the very Best”

Nicola Saunders
Lundy Warden