



The little island with a rich seam of inspiration

Hestan Island in the Solway Firth – guarded by rocks and treacherous mudflats – was once home to a small copper mine. It is now the location for **Clio Gray's** latest novel

Who has heard of Hestan Island? Not many, I suspect. No more had I, until I flicked through Dixie Will's *Tiny Islands* as it landed on the counter at Tain Library (where I work part-time) and I saw several key words that piqued my interest: Scotland, Lighthouse, Copper Mines.

Everyone loves lighthouses, but copper mining on a tiny Scottish island? Now that was unusual, and as a writer of historical fiction unusual always intrigues. As soon as I got home I started going through several touring guides of Scotland, old and new, but the most that was said of Hestan was a "small islet at

the mouth of Auchencairn Bay, Kirkcudbrightshire." My books had let me down. Never a pleasant feeling, and there wasn't much more on the internet, which was a surprise. Eventually I sourced Monograph Number Six of the Auchencairn History Society, *The Story of Hestan Island*, from its author Mark White,

and began my treasure hunt for real.

Hestan was proving to be an extraordinary place with an extraordinary history.

It's a small slump of an island – barely half a kilometre long and a quarter wide – stranded in the Solway Firth, girt by steep cliffs punctuated with caves and geos for most of its circumference. It's barely a mile off-shore but guards its secrets well, accessible only at low tide and only for a couple of short hours. Even at the lowest of neap tides the sea doesn't leave it completely, merely murmurs about its edges, drawing back to reveal vast mudflats across the bays of Balcarry and Auchencairn. A quick march across those flats might seem the obvious approach, but no. That apparently benign surface is dangerously deceptive, riven through with shifting quicksand pouches and hidden channels, and a tide that can turn in a second when a strong

Clockwise from top left: Hestan island; the mudflats at low tide; author Clio Gray

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wind is behind it: a depth of one foot of water blown into four foot-high waves if you're caught unawares.

Approach by boat is similarly tricky, the Solway notoriously mercurial and temperamental: 650 shipwrecks recorded as occurring on this section of the Galloway coast between 1789 and 1988, nine of which were on – or very near – Hestan Island.

The easiest way over is by the winding ribbon of mussel beds known as The Rack – what a name! That was definitely going into the book when I wrote it. But once again speed is essential, for at the Rack's base at Alcorness Point there's a fast filling burn ready to cut the Point off from the Rack before the tide appears to be anywhere near. And I know about those burns, having almost been marooned and lost by another at Humphrey's Head on Morecambe Bay – which is the Solway's twin as far as shifting sands and treacherous tides go. At that time I had to fling myself into a channel that was empty one minute, up to my waist the next – no other choice but to throw myself and the dogs in, the current almost taking my legs out from under me, the four of us scrambling out on hands and knees and legging it back to the car park covered in slimy grey mud, never so glad to see our little campervan as then.

Yet another reason to choose Hestan as a novelistic backdrop into which such an experience could be slotted. An experience that made me very wary when I went to Balcarry with the intention of going over to Hestan to see it for myself, leaving my home in Balintore in the crisp bright weather of late February, arriving in the worst possible conditions, a huge storm having swirled over us on our way with winds you could barely stand up in, rain and sleet bolting down in stair-rods from the lowering clouds that pushed early afternoon into evening hours before its time. An eerie sight, to stand huddled in the trees of the lane that leads from Auchencairn to Balcarry, watching the white-splashed line of wave-tops moving slowly, but with grim and with unstoppable determination, across the mudflats separating the bay from Hestan.

I never got to see the extraordinary rock formation on the island known as The Elephant – which presumably had some other name before anyone here knew what an elephant looked like. I never got to explore the caves, surveil the cottages or visit the extant copper workings, nor sit upon the highest point of the island where Edward Balliol – King of Scotland for a few momentous years – built his garrison fort. Which brings me back to the start, to the copper mines. Hestan, one of the few places in England and Scotland to be productive of such a valuable commodity: Britain – in the early 1800s – contributing

more than half the entire world output of copper. And some of it coming from here – from Hestan. This tiny island in the Solway Firth, the ore dug out here with pickaxes by the three miners resident in the cottages noted in the 1841 census as Peter, Stewart and Samuel Gourlay, aged 40, 40 and 15 years old respectively, from Kirkcudbright and Wigtown. One has to ask if they were not all related. Two brothers maybe, and the oldest son of one. And how it must have been for those three on Hestan: its only inhabitants, very likely building the cottages in which to live, cottages dating from that exact same time; two men and one boy digging out the mines, hacking into the rock of the bluff of the cliff above one of the two tiny shingle beaches. Almost completely cut off from the rest of humanity, very likely keeping up a small croft to provide them with food, milk and eggs.

The rewards must have been worth it for the Gourlays to stay here, and stay they did, one part of the workings going 70 metres into the heart of Hestan. And valuable enough to negotiate the trickiness of getting the ore off the island. There's no harbour, and any vessel over 50 tons would have beached itself on the mud below the shallow waters. But get away that ore they did, taken to Swansea – presumably because the only other major copper mining in Scotland was in Bridge of Allan near Stirling,

and shifting ore by sea would be far preferable to shifting it over land. Wales had its own copper mining industry, particularly in Anglesey, where copper has been exploited for over 4,000 years, and where Parys Mountain was once the largest copper mine in the world. Copper from Wales, Cornwall and Scotland cladding British naval fleets, protecting their wooden boards from the depredations of the sea, the encrustation of barnacles, and providing smooth passage through the water. Copper making those ships the most manoeuvrable vessels of their time, far more efficient than the Spanish or French vessels against which they routinely came into conflict. By 1850, the height of copper mining on Hestan island, the British Fleet was considered the greatest in the world.

One of the smallest islands of Scotland contributing to that claim by means of three men and their three pickaxes. And if that doesn't merit a visit to Hestan Island – if you're hardy enough to get there – well. What would?

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Why we should all embrace the ethos of Swedish death cleaning

Liz Connor is inspired to tackle some of the junk in her home – and feels much better for it

I'm looking at the pile of junk I've pulled from under my bed. The void beneath my mattress has become a no man's land of things I don't use but can't bear to part with: old university projects, ancient diaries with entries that would make you shudder with embarrassment, clothes I'm convinced might come back into fashion, fancy-dress costumes, a broken MacBook, unused Christmas presents... the list goes on.

I've decided it's about time I stop hoarding random relics under the bed – and start 'Swedish Death Cleaning' instead. The phrase translates from the Swedish word 'dostadning', and relates to the practice of clearing out one's possessions before death. The idea is, it saves your loved ones the onerous tasks of having to sift through your items and find homes for them once you're gone, and also frees you from the psychological burden of being surrounded by chaos and clutter.

It's not as depressing as it sounds

The phenomenon was coined by Margareta Magnusson, a Scandi who describes herself as "somewhere between 80 and 100". Having lived by the mantra for years, Margareta has just penned a book on the subject, *The Gentle Art Of Swedish Death Cleaning*. It's already gained headlines here in the UK, thanks to its frank and honest approach to mortality, and our complicated relationship with hoarding.

"Death cleansing means removing unnecessary things and making your home nice and orderly when you think the time is coming close for you to leave the planet," writes Margareta in her no-nonsense guide. Rather than being macabre, she believes cleansing yourself from a lifetime of unnecessary belongings can instate a permanent form of organisation that makes your everyday life run more smoothly.

"When you death clean, it stops you from running around the house looking for your bag or your keys,



↑ **Decluttering will help you regain control of your life, says author Margareta Magnusson**

because there are less things for them to get lost in," Margareta says. "It gives you more time and makes you less stressed."

It can be done at any age

I know what you're thinking – at 28, I'm (hopefully) not fit for the grave yet, but Margareta insists that death cleaning can be done at any age, and you don't actually have to wait until you know you're on your way out. It's a method for reevaluating your possessions, taking stock of what's important, and removing what's not.

"Just look around you. Many of your things have probably been around for so long that you do not even see or value them any more," she explains.

"Your exhaustion with all this stuff may appear out of the blue one day. When someone cancels a weekend visit or a dinner, you feel grateful instead of disappointed, because you may be too tired to clean up for their visit."

So how do you get started?

Magnusson recommends dividing your belongings by category and tackling the easiest one first. She suggests starting with clothing, and avoiding sentimental items like photographs, otherwise you'll get stuck in memory lane.

Aside from pulling the plug on a borderline hoarding issue, the method reveals that there's also a joy to spending an afternoon picking through mementos of the past. "I've discovered that it is rewarding to spend time with these objects one last time, and then dispose of them. Each item has its own history, and remembering that history is often enjoyable," says Margareta.

Hold on to the precious stuff

Of course, you don't have to throw away everything in a minimalist rage. "Save the things that make you happy, or your life easier," says Margareta. "Throw away the things that have accumulated that you no longer need."

For private keepsakes that are priceless, such as my hilariously angst-ridden diaries, Margareta suggests creating a "Throw Away" box. "When I find things that have absolutely no value to anyone else, but enormous value for me, they go in my Throw Away box," she says. "Once I am gone, the box can be destroyed."

So how does it feel?

After an initial wave of dread and regret upon leaving the charity shop, I soon feel better looking at the pleasantly clear space under my bed. It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

It seems, whatever your age, death cleaning is good for the soul – but for the elderly, it can be the greatest gift you leave your loved ones. "Once someone has gone, things can be chaotic enough," Margareta says. "Sorting through everything is sad sometimes, but I really do not want to give my beloved children and their families too much trouble with my stuff after I'm gone."

● *The Gentle Art Of Swedish Death Cleaning: How To Free Yourself And Your Family From A Lifetime Of Clutter* by Margareta Magnusson is published by Canongate, priced £12.99. Available now.

