A lifeline for the future

Simon Johnson speaks with Stuart Reid of the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company to find out how the operator is renewing its essential service to the English islands

England's only archipelago, the Isles of Scilly, lies 23 miles off the southwestern tip of Cornwall. Designated as a protected National Landscape, the 145 islands are renowned for their unspoiled natural beauty, and the small community of just over 2,000 permanent residents plays host to tens of thousands of visitors each year.

For the last 105 years, the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company has been an essential part of life on the islands. The lifeline service provided by the company since 1920 is responsible for transporting residents, guests and essential supplies to and from the mainland.

"Our founding directors decided that it was essential to maintain the vital link between Penzance on the mainland and the Isles of Scilly," says Stuart Reid, CEO of the ferry operator. "The company was born to keep that lifeline operational, and today, we provide the only real support for the islands."

More than 120,000 passengers a year step onboard Scillonian III, the company's passenger ferry which operates six days a week between March and November. The vessel – one of only three in the world still designated as a Royal Mail Ship – was built in 1977 and has sailed to the Isles of Scilly ever since. To keep it operational, the ferry undergoes regular maintenance at Penzance Dry Docks.

"Scillonian III is still incredibly reliable," says Reid. "Throughout all 48 years of its history, we've only lost about 25 to 30 days to mechanical breakdown. That's because of the amount we invest in the vessel during the winter months, when we strip down the engine and put it all back together again. However, spare parts for a ship of that age are becoming increasingly difficult to find, and it costs significant sums to keep it going. That's why in 2019 we made the decision to replace our vessels."

The Isles of Scilly Steamship Company has invested more than £40 million ($54.1 million) in new passenger and cargo vessels to maintain the lifeline services to the Isles of Scilly. The two ships are currently under construction at Piriou Shipyard in Vietnam. The freight vessel is due to be delivered in 2026, while the passenger ferry will enter service in 2027.

"Scillonian IV will be quicker than the existing vessel and offer increased capacity, with room for up to 600 passengers," says Reid.

While the ship will be powered by a diesel engine due to costs, the operator has ensured it is prepared for new alternative fuels.

"We've designed this vessel with future proofing in mind," says Reid. "Whatever the fuel type of the future, whether it be batteries, hydrogen or an alternative fuel source, the vessel has been constructed to allow containerised fuel cells to be lifted onboard and plugged into the propulsion system." The vessel will also feature anti-roll fins and new Hull Vane technology from naval architect Van Ossanen. This system will help to reduce the pitching movement of the vessel, reducing fuel use by up to 10 per cent while also improving the ride for passengers."

From the early concept designs created by Jeremy Spear of Spear Green Designs, the operator has focused on Scillonian IV being designed with aesthetic appeal and comfort in mind to help it attract more visitors to the islands.

"This isn't just about getting from A to B," says Reid. "One of the key points

> "We've designed this vessel with future proofing in mind"

I made in our first meetings with our naval architect, BMT Architects, was that I wanted the vessels to look attractive. The ship will have a prominent place in Penzance, and I want people to come into the town and think 'I want to go on that'.

"The vessel will feature comfortable seating and large windows, allowing guests to look out onto the scenery as they travel to the islands. There will also be increased cargo capacity for luggage, camping equipment, kayaks, diving equipment – everything you might want to bring on holiday."

The operator is working with several Cornish companies to ensure it is using local materials wherever possible, including hydraulic and steering systems from manufacturers Armarda Engineering and Wills Ridley.

"As a responsible entity, we have to make sure that we are using local, sustainable materials, and we've done that wherever we can," says Reid.

This commitment to the local community has been part of the company from its founding to the present day, as it works closely with businesses and charities to support their work. Maintaining this connection with the delivery of the new ships is essential to the survival of the community, suggests Reid.

"Tourism makes up 85 per cent of the Isles' economy," he says. "In reality, that means they are almost entirely reliant on that income. That's why we work closely with the community to connect passengers with local businesses. We bring the passengers, and they provide everything they need for an enjoyable visit – it's a symbiotic relationship." **CFR**