

An educational resource centre in Britain

IOLA SMITH

ONCE a sanctuary for saints and smugglers, Slatholm is now the haunt of seagulls and schoolchildren. Since being developed as a nature reserve by South Glamorgan county council in 1982, this island in the Bristol Channel has become an educational resource centre giving children practical experience in topics as diverse as geography and physics.

"The compactness of the island makes it ideal for in-depth ecological studies," says Dr. David Worrall, Slatholm's project officer. "Pupils can either participate in our biological research programmes — such as ear-tagging and monitoring the 800-strong rabbit population or evaluating the diets of blackbirds and thrushes — or undertake their own investigations."

"Ornithological projects are popular because the vast gull colonies can be observed at close quarters. But it is because of its unusual flora that Slatholm has been designated a site of special scientific interest by the Nature Conservancy Council. It is one of the few places in Britain where the rare

wild leek still grows."

Pupils reach Slatholm by boat the same mode of transport used 1,500 years ago by the island's first known visitors, Celtic saints. But these were not the only dark age tourists. In the 10th century the Danes arrived, giving the island its name — holm is derived from the Scandinavian for river island — so there is considerable scope for historical research on the island.

It earns a footnote in the medical history books, too. Its 19th century cholera hospital was used to isolate sick sailors from the mainland. Its main scientific claim to fame lies in audio physics. In 1897, Marconi first transmitted a wireless communication across water from Slatholm to the South Wales coast.

Technology of a different kind powers the island's lighthouse, a popular venue for primary schoolchildren. It is now manned by three keepers but it is due to be automated later this year.

Resource centres such as Slatholm are used mainly for geography, biology or geology pro-

jects. But Worrall is anxious to make the island relevant to many other subjects, especially as the new GCSE examination courses demand field studies.

"We are hoping to cater for pupils studying art, literature and languages by launching painting and poetry workshops and intensive language courses for sixth formers learning French or Welsh. These courses would immerse the students in the languages by making sure that all activities on the island were carried out through those modern languages," says Worrall.

Schools are not the only beneficiaries of the Slatholm project. It also creates jobs for unemployed young people under the auspices of the Manpower Services Commission community programme.

Almost 200 youngsters have spent the past five years renovating the 18th century farmhouse and converting it into residential accommodation for visiting groups. But to ensure that the wildlife is fully protected, only 50 visitors are allowed on the island at any one time.