



Programme Four:

Islands Apart

Alan Titchmarsh ventures 50m below the English Channel, scales an ancient tree in the New Forest and stalks red deer in Scotland to tell the story of how island Britain was created.

“In just a few thousand years, the British landscape had been transformed – the great ice sheets had melted and in their place a great forest flourished. The sea level rose, flooding those great land bridges that once linked us to mainland Europe. From being on the fringes of a great continent, we were now a collection of green and fertile islands,” says Alan.

To retrace this amazing transformation, which started about 12,000 years ago, Alan searches for clues across the country. He discovers tropical nickar nuts while beach-combing in Scotland; finds palm trees growing in latitudes where polar bears should feel more at home; and witnesses elegant whooper swans in Cambridgeshire, who fly in from Siberia for Britain’s milder winters – all of which point to the warming influence of the Gulf Stream.

Once the ice had melted, Britain was re-colonised by flora and fauna. The first trees to get a foothold were those which dispersed fastest – pines and birch. Eventually, the country was covered by a wildwood – a dense, deciduous forest of oak, ash, beech and lime. The colourful jay helped spread acorns.

One consequence of Britain’s separation into islands is that different species of animals now exist in neighbouring lands. Ireland only has 20 mammals, compared with 31 on the mainland.

Britain’s stunning 25,000km coastline is the greatest legacy of the end of the Ice Age. Not only was it a fertile breeding ground for seabirds, the coast was also popular with man’s earliest ancestors. On the tiny Hebridean island of Oronsay, Alan finds an ancient mound created by humans from millions of shells.

Producer: Ian Gray



Ancient mound of discarded shells, Oronsay

“The sea level rose, flooding those great land bridges that once linked us to mainland Europe”



Gannets on Bass Rock, Scotland