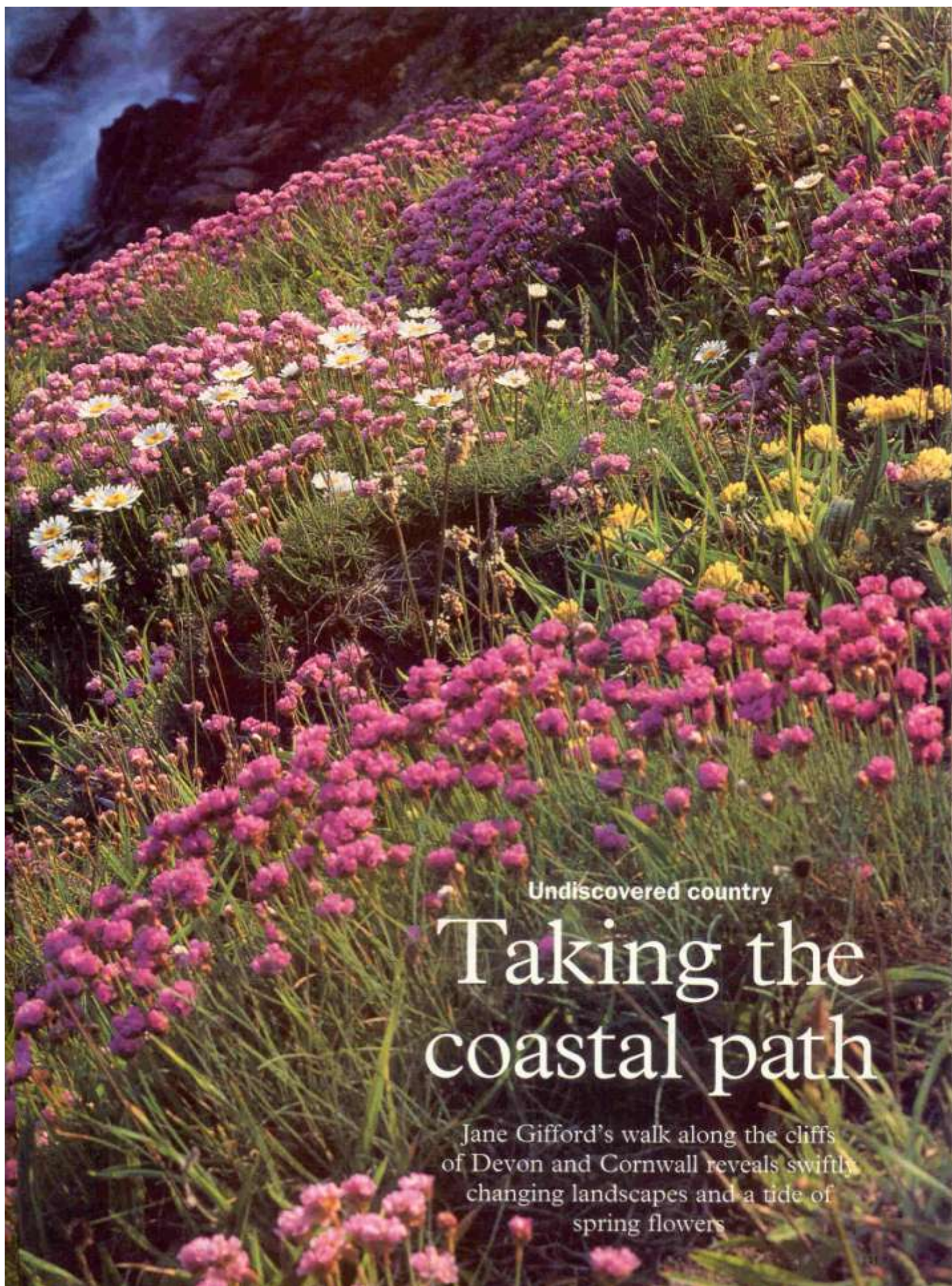




Thrift is one of the first flowers in bloom on the cliffs at Hartland Point, north Devon



Undiscovered country

Taking the coastal path

Jane Gifford's walk along the cliffs
of Devon and Cornwall reveals swiftly
changing landscapes and a tide of
spring flowers



Top: a flower lined path winds through coastal farmland.
Left: Port Isaac Bay, north Cornwall.
Right: navelwort and stonecrop find easy footholds in the spaces of a drystone wall

Photographs
Jane Gifford



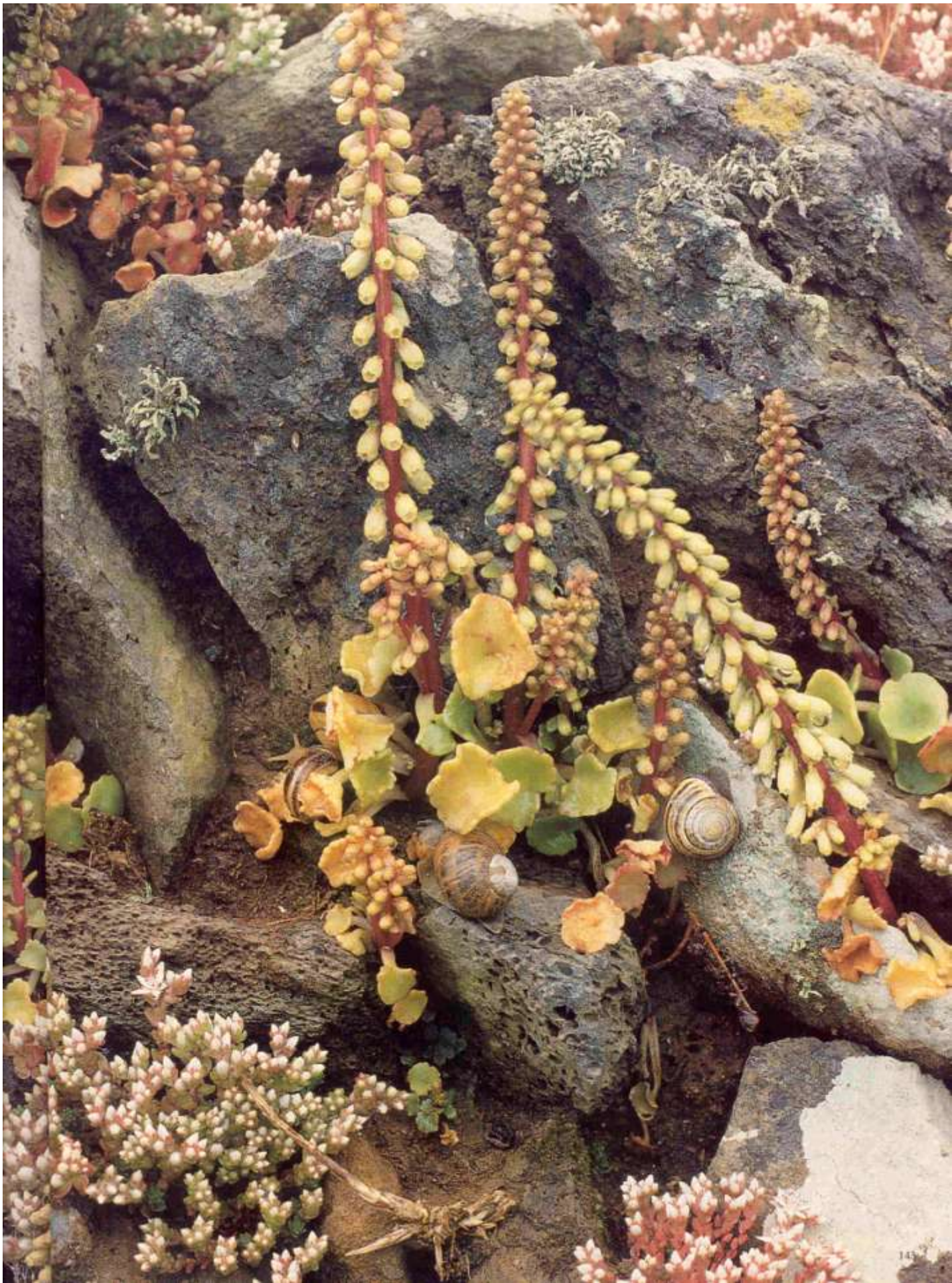
Whenever I am feeling jaded and tired of the demands of work, I take myself down to the coastal paths of Devon or Cornwall and allow the Atlantic breeze to blow my blues away. Exchange the flow of correspondence for the flow of the tides, and I can return with renewed vigour to the battlefield, my lungs still fresh with the tang of the sea.

Take any 20 mile stretch of the southwest coast and you will find a swiftly changing variety of landscapes. From Hartland Point in north Devon down the Cornish coast towards Bude, convulsions in the earth's geological history are revealed in striped cliffscapes of warm red sandstone and grey shale.

A shipwreck is gripped by fingers of rock which reach way out into the Atlantic, far beyond the

lighthouse. Waterfalls shimmer down fern filled gullies to the shore or tumble over the cliff face to the rocks below. Sheltered sandy coves and soaring green beacons, a cliff-top church and gentle wooded coombs give way to an exhilarating stretch of wide golden sands at Bude. This story of contrast and variety continues the length of the coastal path, round Cornwall and back again into Devon. Old pasture ▷







From top: Sandymouth Bay, near Bude, north Cornwall; ox-eyed daisies line the path to a Devon pub; a shipwreck near the lighthouse at Hartland Point is an ominous reminder of the sea's dangers; sea bindweed on a sand dune



◁ turns to heather and to wind-twisted woods. Sand runs to shingle and backs up into dunes. Giddy cliffs appear, with hidden beaches and wide open views, interrupted by ancient burial mounds, wells and forts.

The River Camel carves a wide estuary to the sea at Padstow, which like St Ives further south has survived seaside harbour development with the heart and character of the old town still intact. The Penwith Peninsula has cliffs of crystal spangled granite. Here field patterns still follow pre-historic boundaries. Standing stones watch over open boulder strewn moorland, which edges over cliffs scarred with the ruins of Cornwall's industrial past.

Even when these landmarks have become familiar friends, the charm of the coast is ever changing. I love the tide of flowers which sweeps the cliffs in spring. Sky blue squill and pink thrift amongst the first, with the pale trumpets of sea campion and the white bells of the triangular stemmed, three cornered leek. Splashes of yellow appear with the vetches and flow into the deeper tones of early summer – bluebells, red valerian, orchids and foxgloves.

Cliff-top pasture and heathland on the Lizard are a special delight for lovers of rare wild flowers which flourish amongst some of the oldest rocks in Great Britain – strange configurations of whorled green and red serpentine, sparkling with mica, olive green hornblende striped with black. Everywhere else lichens repaint the rocks in their own colours of orange, grey and sage green.

Footpaths run the length of the coast, occasionally turning back through farmland only to wander again to the sea. The option of a brief detour inland to a nearby inn is always close at hand. And if all this sounds a little energetic for your mood, then find some comfortable rock, sheltered from the wind, and gaze out to sea.

Should mist roll in, as it often does, banking up against the shore and then billowing over the clifftops, silencing even the gulls and turning England's jewelled southwest coast into a place of pale mystery and calm, don't be dismayed. Wait a while and the mist is bound to lift, and as it does, the Atlantic begins to sparkle again through the clouds. □

Information on places to visit, accommodation and the condition of paths and gradients is available in *The South West Way* (Peninsula Press, £3.99)