**A person smiling for the camera

Description automatically generatedAnecdotes**

**Cressida Cowell: early island life and the stories it inspired**

I grew up in London, but my dad’s heart was in the wilderness. Every spring and summer, we were taken to an uninhabited island off the west coast of Scotland – an island so small that when you stood on the top of it, you could see sea all around you. We’d be dropped off on that island by a local boatman and picked up again two weeks later. And there was nothing on the island! No shops, no houses. When I was nine, my dad had a house built on the island and we spent the whole summer there, and my dad got a boat, so he could catch fish. It was an incredible experience for a child.

That island was the inspiration for my *How to Train Your Dragon* books, because it was the first place the Vikings came to when they invaded Great Britain, and the last place they left. There were real ruined houses on that little island I used to explore, play in, and pretend I was a Viking.

I have a special fondness for the sea, the wildness of it. I remember an extraordinary occasion when we were on a beach on Mull, just the family, having a picnic. We had this beach, which is like a secret cove, entirely to ourselves, nobody there, blue… The boat was moored in quite shallow water, and a pod of dolphins came in to play with the boat in the bay. The children ran into the water and they were all just playing around the moored boat. It was a magical moment. The sea landscapes, those wildernesses of the Hebrides are the most beautiful places. Particularly when the sun is shining. My heart just lifts when I go to that western part of Scotland.

My father didn’t necessarily know what he was doing in a boat! And on those tricky waters in the Hebrides… He would do things like accidentally tie the boat to a lobster pot instead of a buoy. I remember going out in a storm, where we were bailing out the water and it really did feel very dangerous. You suddenly realise that this is an out-of-control situation about which you can do nothing.

Anybody who has camped in the 1970s will know that 70s tents were not waterproof! We’d get very wet and not be able to dry out. And then if you did manage to get your jeans to dry out, they would turn stiff with the salt. Like putting on cardboard jeans. Many of my hero Hiccup’s experiences – of the cold, of the damp, of being frightened by going out into the sea in storms – are definitely ones that I had in my childhood.

Taken and abridged from <https://www.countryfile.com/people/interviews/my-countryside-interview-cressida-cowell/>