

Torbay's Seagrass Beds

An Underwater Forest



WHAT IS SEAGRASS?

Seagrasses are not seaweeds but the only group of flowering plants able to survive fully submerged in seawater. They evolved from terrestrial plants and are the oldest living thing on Earth. The plants have complex root systems in the seabed and long green slender leaves which produce flowers May - September and produce seeds, just like land grasses.

Seagrass plants create vast underwater grass meadows known as seagrass beds which typically grow in waters shallower than 10m. Some seagrass can be seen at low spring tides (e.g. Torre Abbey Sands) but most of them are below the low water line.

WHY IS SEAGRASS IN DECLINE?

Seagrass plants can be fairly resilient but recovery is very slow so repeated damage to a seagrass bed can cause it to diminish and disappear. It is a complex fragile habitat and is a feature of the Torbay Marine Conservation Zone and is protected under the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

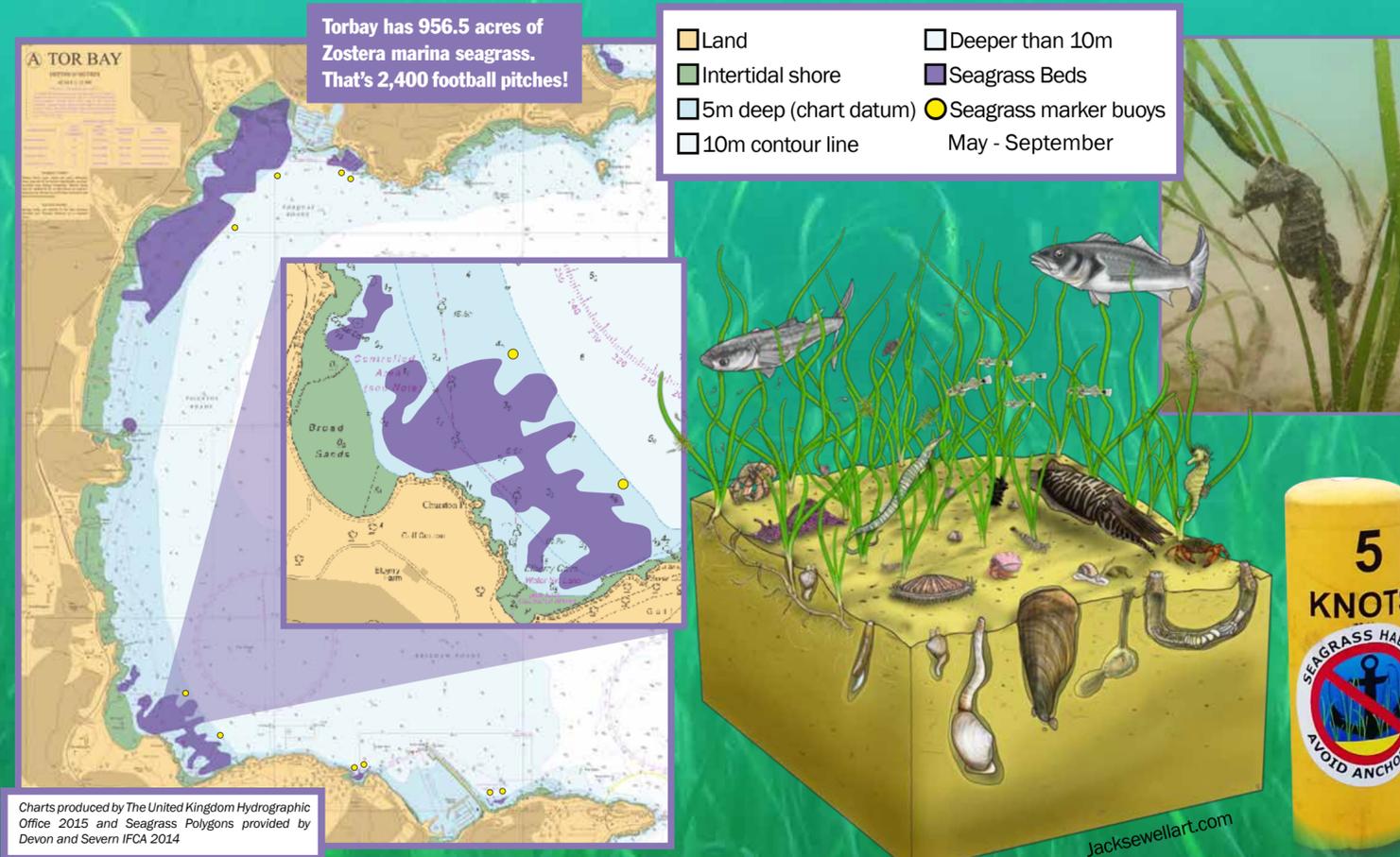
Seagrass beds are at risk from storms and land run off which contains pollutants and high levels of nutrients (e.g. fertilisers). Human activities such as dredging, bottom trawling, anchoring and jet ski wash in shallow water can damage seagrass.

Torbay's seagrass beds have been declared voluntary no 'anchoring zones' and mobile fishing gear is not permitted. The biggest threat to seagrass is people not knowing where it is or how important it is.

ELBERRY COVE TO BROADSANDS BEACH

239.6 ACRES - 120 FOOTBALL PITCHES

This sheltered seagrass bed is one of largest in Torbay stretching from Elberry Cove to the North end of Broadsands beach. The beds location is shown in the map below. The bed starts 50 metres out from the shore and extends about 650 metres out to sea and right up to the rocks on either side of the beach. This bed has almost continuous, dense seagrass across this area and the main risks to it are from anchoring and power craft travelling at high speed in the shallows on low tides.



WHAT LIVES THERE?

Seagrass beds are home to weird and wonderful creatures such as colourful sea slugs (nudibranchs), spider crabs, eyelash worms, moon snails, sea stars, sea squirts, stalked jellyfish and cat sharks. Commercially important species such as cuttlefish, flatfish, bass, pollack, sea bream, scallops, whelks and wrasse also breed and feed in the seagrass beds. There are 40 times more animals in seagrass than on bare sand!



SEAGRASS MARKER BUOYS AND ECO-MOORINGS

Marker buoys are located near the seagrass beds May - September to make water users aware of the location of the seagrass beds. There is a voluntary code of conduct which includes no anchoring for boats and slow speeds for jet skis. Eco-moorings are specially designed to have no impact on seagrass, unlike traditional moorings, whose heavy chains scour the seabed around the sinker block.



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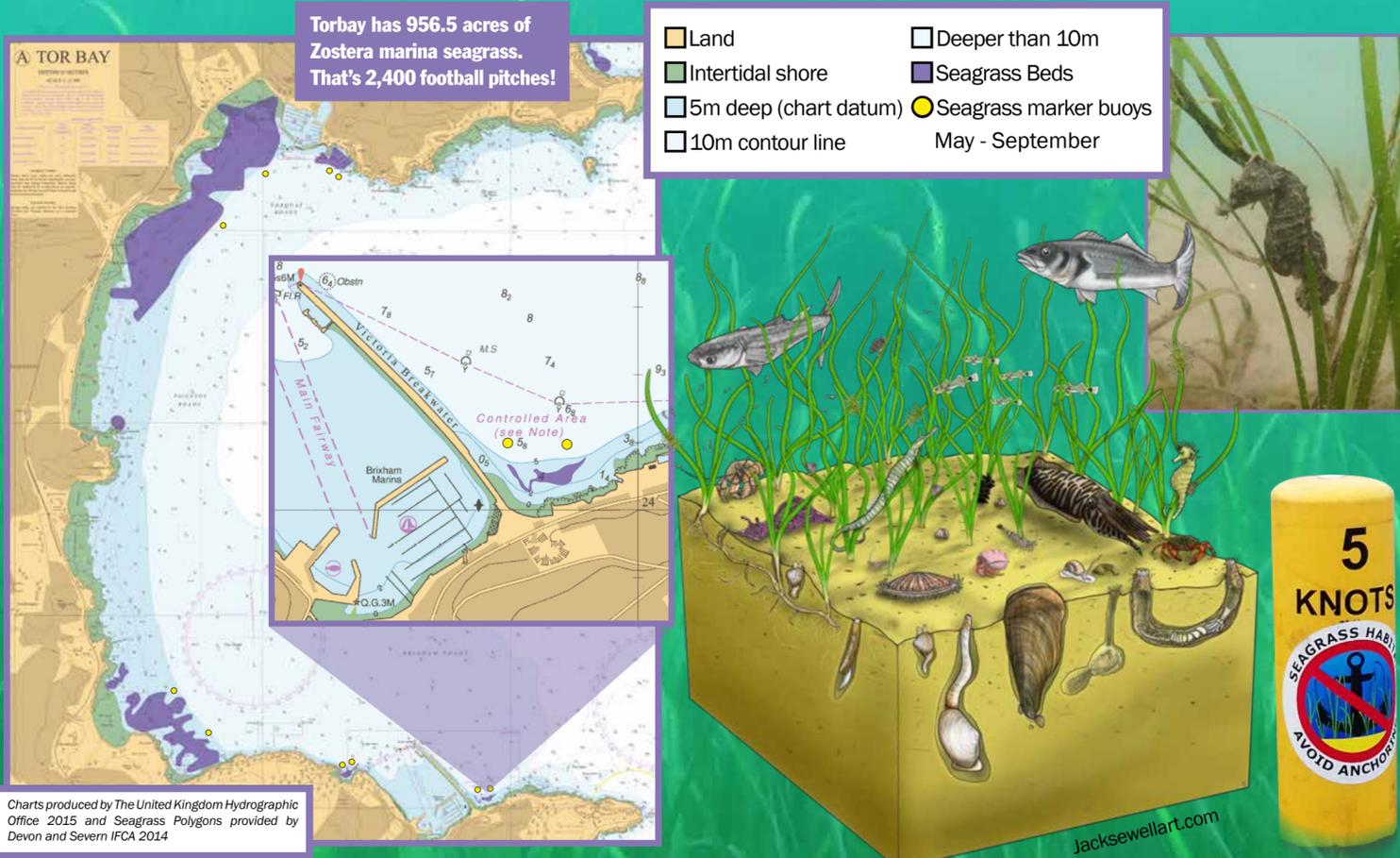
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BRIXHAM BREAKWATER

5.5 ACRES - 2.75 FOOTBALL PITCHES

This is one of the smaller seagrass beds in Torbay, which hugs the shape of the beach from the Breakwater all the way around to Lady Bird Cove. However, due to its position, north-easterly storms may change the shape of the seagrass bed year on year by uprooting the plants. Past the submerged pebbly beach, the seabed turns to fine sand where the seagrass likes to grow. It is a mix of dense and sparse patches growing in muddy-sand and gravel at a depth of between 1.5 and 4 metres below the springtide low water level. The main risk to this bed is from north easterly storms, sediment smothering from near-by dredging and being uprooted by unaware anchoring boat users.



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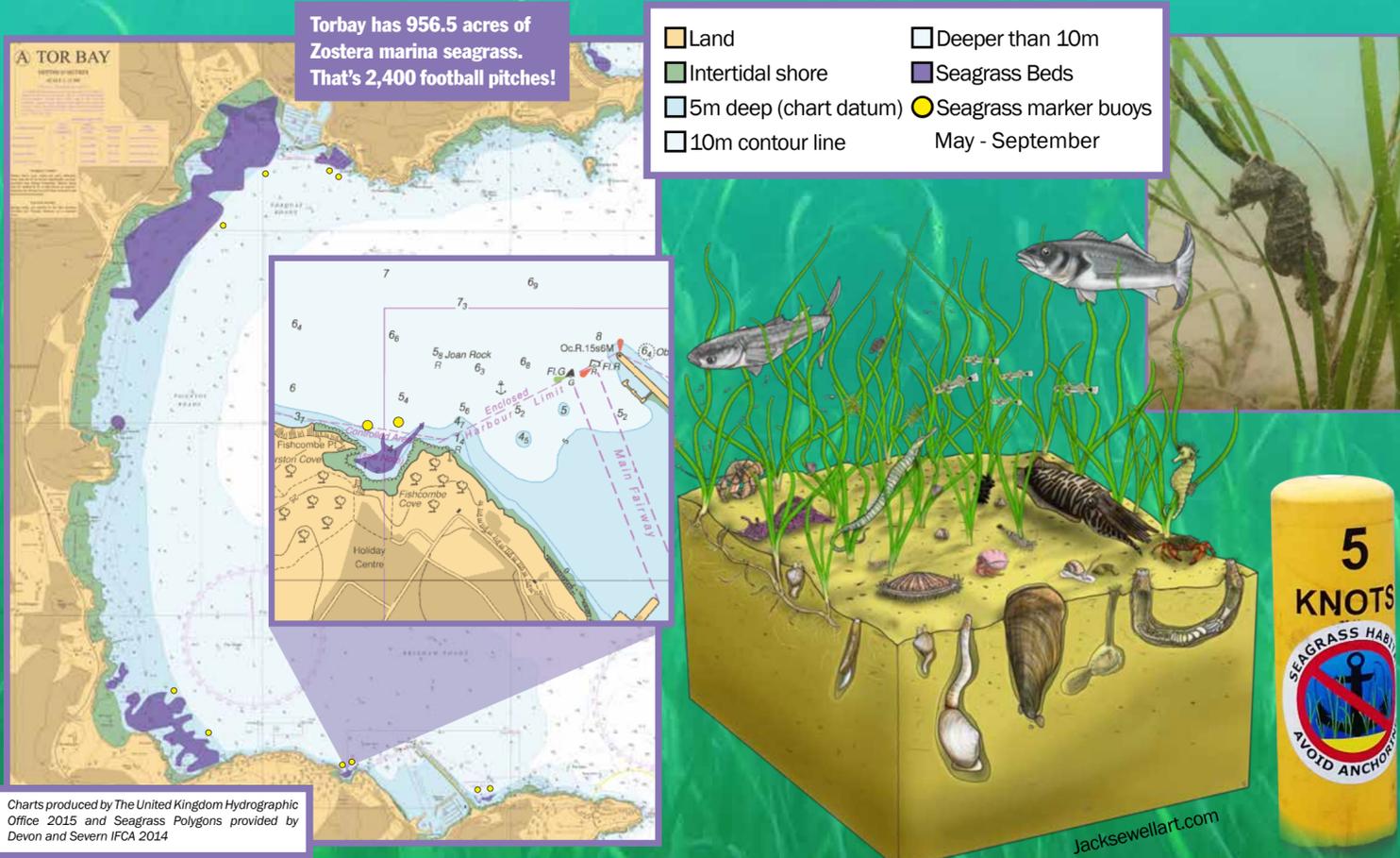
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FISHCOMBE COVE

2.2 ACRES - JUST OVER THE SIZE OF A FOOTBALL PITCH

This is one of smaller beds in Torbay. In 2006 a scallop dredger removed a large area from the middle of the bed, which has struggled to recover ever since. The shape of the bed mirrors the shape of the cove. As this location is very sheltered, the seagrass bed does not change shape much from year to year and is comprised of dense seagrass growing in muddy sand at a depth of 1 to 6 metres below the springtide low water level. The main threat to this seagrass bed is anchoring by unaware boat users.



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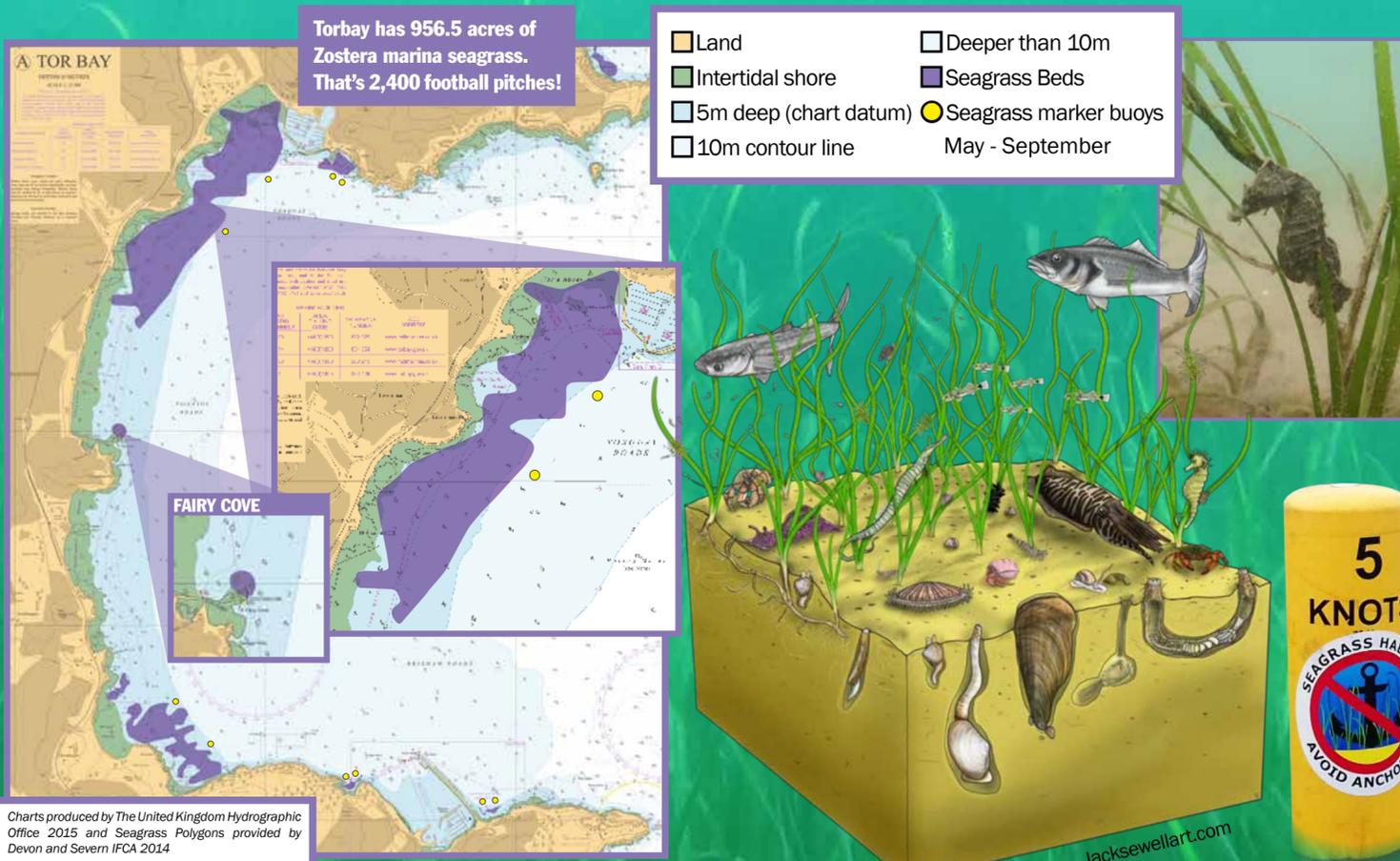
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TORRE ABBEY

677 ACRES - 338 FOOTBALL PITCHES

This is the largest area of seagrass beds in Torbay, extending from Princess Pier Torquay, down to Paignton Sands. Unusually for Torbay the seagrass can often be seen exposed during low tide at Torre Abbey Sands. Elsewhere in the Bay it is always submerged. This seagrass bed extends hundreds of metres out to sea ending when it reaches a depth of 5 metres. The seagrass grows in the mixed fine sand and broken shells and the growth is less dense than in the other beds around the Bay. The main risks to this bed are from boat anchoring and beaching and power craft travelling at high speed in the shallows on low tides, or nearby trawling activity.



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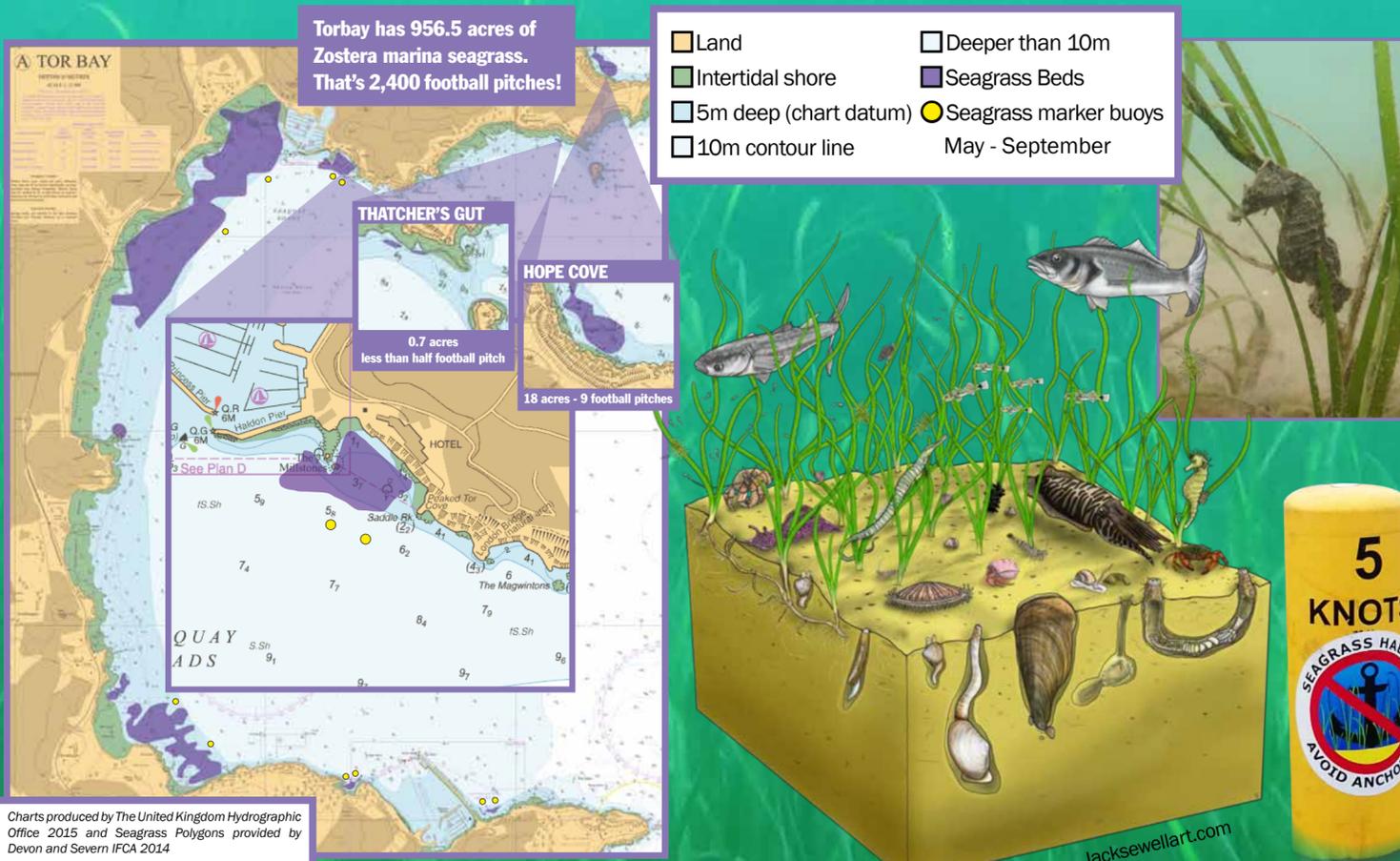
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MILLSTONES

24 ACRES - 12 FOOTBALL PITCHES

This sheltered bay contains a seagrass bed which mirrors the shape of the cove and starts 5 to 10 meters out from the shore and rocky cliff where it is densest and grows out past the Millstones but becomes sparser. The dense seagrass grows from an ancient rhizome bed that rises above the mixed sand, silt and broken shells. A number of large ship anchors have been found in this bed. The bed is tucked away location means that it is not heavily impacted by human activities apart from anchoring in the summer. It is also sheltered from north-easterly winter storms but it is affected by lighter south westerlies.



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