

Visiting Vectis

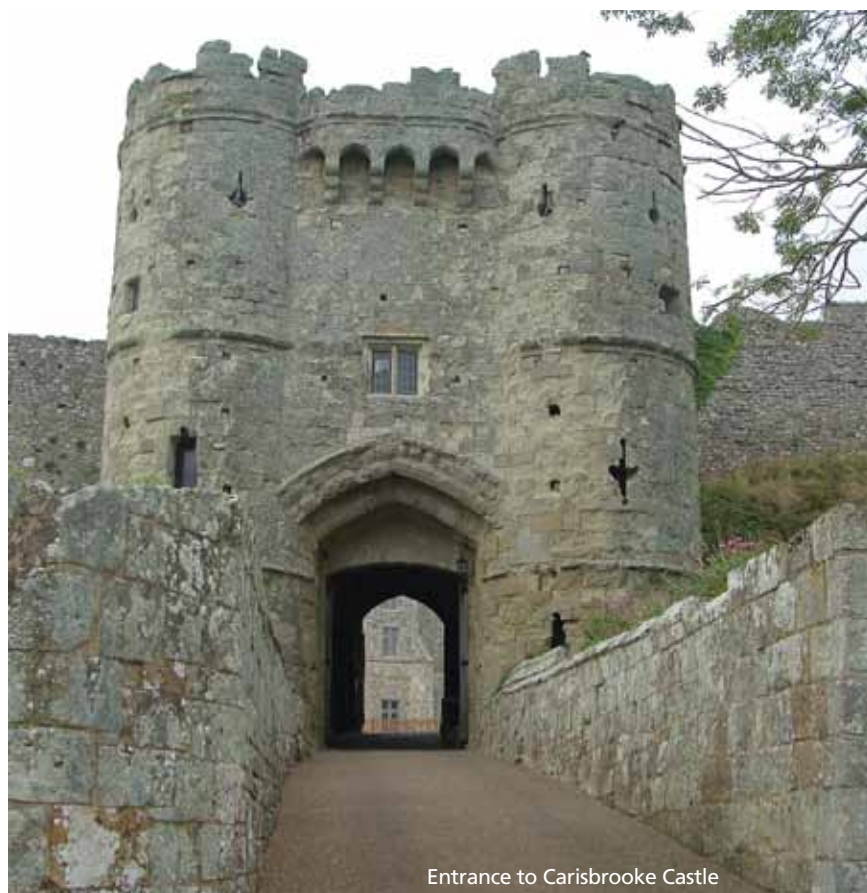
The Isle of Wight

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Visiting Norwegians must be puzzled why so large and populous an island does not have bridge or tunnel access to the mainland. These have been proposed but wars have intervened and many local people like to preserve their difference from the mainland by resisting better connections than those made by the ferry services.

The oldest ferry company is Red Funnel – originally the Southampton, Isle of Wight and South of England Royal Mail Steam Ship Packet PLC, registered in 1861 – which operates both car and Red Jet services from Southampton to Cowes. Wightlink runs car ferry services from Portsmouth to Fishbourne and Lymington to Yarmouth, with a Fast Catamaran service from Portsmouth Harbour Station to Ryde Pier Head. For many day visitors the Hovercraft provides a service unique to the UK from Southsea to the seafront in Ryde. Within living memory barges were brought over to Ryde and beached at high tide, and unloaded as the tide went out. Next to the ferry terminal at Yarmouth is the best preserved of Henry VIII's forts alongside a delightful small town. At Cowes the ferries pass the Royal Yacht Squadron, housed since 1855 within the remains of another Henrician fort, and patronised since its launch in 1815 by royalty and a wealthy elite.

Those arriving at Ryde Pier Head have a choice: they can make their own way down a pier opened in 1814 that has recently been refurbished by Wightlink or catch a 1938 London Underground tube train that runs on third rail power down an 1880 pier and on to Shanklin. This heavily-subsidised line survives because some method of taking people down the pier is still needed, especially at Music Festival time! Some of you will remember the famous/notorious 1970 Rock Festival that took place in West Wight: today's Festivals in and around Newport are well organised and popular derivatives.



Entrance to Carisbrooke Castle

Most visitors will want to visit the most famous of the Island's historical attractions, Osborne House and Carisbrooke Castle. Both give free admission to English Heritage members and it would be worth considering joining. Yarmouth Castle and Appuldurcombe House are also EH owned. There is plenty of information about both Osborne House and the Castle. It is worth remembering that while Carisbrooke Castle fulfilled its initial purpose very well, to protect the person and interests of the Norman Lords of the island after 1066, it did little to protect the rest of the island against the numerous French attacks. This did not come until forts were built

at Yarmouth, Sandown, Cowes and Freshwater. For students of military and naval history, there are many sites of interest around the island, and curious forts in the Solent, many the product of the 1850s but some from more recent war scares, as at Culver Down. Carisbrooke Castle also has an independent Museum, and with a prior appointment it is possible to visit the museum in winter months when the rest of the castle is closed. This also has an excellent library and large collection material, relating to the island's story.

Financial restraints have put on hold efforts to provide a modern Record Office; meanwhile, the helpful staff will do what they can, but do check opening



hours. The office is on a hill above the harbour in Newport. In recent years Newport has taken over from Ryde as the leading town on the island, with large stores bringing traffic that clogs up the town centre whose streets are still recognisably medieval in plan. It was developed at the lowest bridging point of the River Medina, just down the road from Carisbrooke. Carisbrooke is a western suburb today but was more important in early medieval times. Its church, St Mary's, was granted soon after the Norman Conquest by William FitzOsbern to the Benedictine Abbey of Lyre in Normandy, which he had founded. A priory was established about 1147 but the church feels more like a parish church than a monastic one, as there were never more than six brothers

resident. Medieval parishes ran across the island from north to south, and the oldest churches today are not found in Ryde or Newport but in rural villages like Shalfleet and Shorwell. All Saints Godshell's medieval painting of a lily crucifix is one of only two in Europe. At one time each parish was responsible for purchasing and maintaining a gun, the Carisbrooke gun is in the castle museum dating to 1549. It was sold early in the nineteenth century to pay for the repair of the churchyard wall.

A brief overview of island history will be helpful before referring to places to visit on a tour of the island. The island separated from the mainland about 4000 BC at the latest, and some of the most interesting evidence has come from underwater archaeology,

from Fishbourne and Newtown, of the Mesolithic and Neolithic times. During the Iron Age the island developed its agriculture and this probably attracted the Romans. Remains of several Roman villas have been found: two are on show. Brading has had recent archaeological digs led by Sir Barry Cunliffe and a splendid new building to display the mosaics. Newport is smaller but easier to understand. Recent finds coming from the 'Dark Ages' suggest a wealthier society than was thought until recently, but many of these have yet to be assessed by the experts. The Saxon rulers left signs of their organisation in the parish structures and elsewhere. From the Conquest to 1293 the Crown had passed control to a Lord, and the last was Isabella de Fortibus. With no heir, she

The interior of Carisbrooke Castle



Godshell



Newtown Old Town Hall

Appuldurcombe House



sold the power back to the Crown on her deathbed.

The island was starting to move into prosperous times by 1300 when new towns had been established for over 100 years at Newport, Brading, and Yarmouth. The Wars against France over the next century were disastrous for the island. As late as the reign of Henry VII legislation was passed banning islanders from leaving the island. In 1377 all the island except for Carisbrooke Castle fell into French hands, and a layer of charcoal under Newport still gives evidence today of what happened. Newtown never recovered.

The Reformation saw the dissolution of the Abbey at Quarr. The medieval quarries that had supplied stone to Portchester Castle and sundry cathedrals were becoming exhausted. In 1588 the Armada passed by, but there was sufficient alarm for Carisbrooke Castle's defences to be modernised against artillery attack. By the 1600s there was a strong Protestant feeling in the towns. Charles I came to the island in 1647 and left under arrest to be taken to his trial and death in London. Most of the island was now owned by wealthy landowners like the Worsley, Holmes and Oglander families, governed from their seats at Appuldurcombe, Yarmouth and Nunwell.

By 1800 a wealthy few had started discovering the delights of sea bathing and fresh air away from London smogs. Lord Yarborough, a Leicestershire landowner, inherited the Worsley land

and started selling it, as well as helping to set up the Royal Yacht Squadron. Ryde began to grow rapidly. In the second half of the century, railways started to carry visitors to central and eastern parts of the island. Tourism became a major employer.

Traditional industries on the island had been agriculture and fishing, supplemented by smuggling. After 1800, boat building developed in Cowes, and with growing government involvement through two world wars so did allied war industries in high technology, notably radar.

It is to history that we turn to explain the variety of people found living – or at least, owning property – on the island. The super-rich came for the sailing, the quality of air and the romance of a place that was hard to reach. Many earned their living by catering for them, often however, in jobs that were seasonal. Today, with few major industries, the local government struggles financially. One major employer is HM Prisons, with Pankhurst, Albany and Camp Hill adjacent to Newport where there were once army barracks (now united as Isle of Wight Prison).

The north and east of the island are the most heavily populated. Walk around Ryde and you will find many delightful buildings and indeed a terrace from the early nineteenth century. Snobs in 1838 disagreed: the speculators were little men, who built the 'genteel residences'; 'the houses

more resemble a slice of second-rate fashionable London, stuck on the side of the Island, than anything which one would be prepared to meet with'. Two local heritage groups have worked hard to rescue the Cemetery and the Arcade. Local history is very popular on the island, and there are many good exhibitions worth visiting. Seaview, St Helens and Bembridge are all related to the sea and sailing; a little exploration into their history will show that St Helens used to have the gas works, so has come up in the world since their demolition. But it also had an early golf course on its Duver (a sandy strip of land) visited by royalty. An RNLI lifeboat station was built in Bembridge in 1867, and the *Queen Victoria* of 1887, the oldest surviving RNLI lifeboat, can usually be found at Arreton Barns. The island's one surviving tower mill in Bembridge (National Trust) goes back at least to the 1740s, and has never burnt down. Sandown has a modern Dinosaur Museum, and Shanklin has the Chine, a Victorian attraction from the days when visitors were fascinated by ferns, and still kept interesting today with historical exhibitions. The Pluto pipeline that sent petrol to France after the Normandy landings ran down the Chine, and pumps can be seen in Bembridge Heritage Exhibition and at the Zoo in Sandown.

Brading has an old church, a restored Market Hall and the old Bull Ring. Newchurch's church parish once served from Ryde in the north to the south coast. The narrow lanes by which it is approached from the north are part of its attraction. Nearby Nunwell was the home of the Oglander family, who were the last hosts of King Charles I before his imprisonment in Carisbrooke Castle and execution. Appuldurcombe, seat of the Worsley family, is near Wroxall. While the house is a protected ruin, the grounds and setting are still magnificent.

The south of the island from Ventnor to the west is much less densely inhabited. Ventnor was highly rated by Victorians who had travelled on the continent as it reminded them of Italy, with its steep slopes and quiet sea views. Artists visited Bonchurch in numbers. Swinburne is perhaps the most notorious and then there were many visiting celebrities like Dickens – I hope we do not have to put up a plaque for all of them. Dickens' stay in Bonchurch was not a disaster, but he was not as enthusiastic as most Victorians about its natural attractions. Enjoy the Victorian houses like Compton Undermount, entered through a tunnel lined with shells (1857). Brighstone, named after Ecbright who gave it to

the see of Winchester in 826, has a beautiful churchyard in spring and a row of attractive cottages with a small museum. It is famous for having three Rectors who became bishops – Thomas Ken, Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Moberley. Calbourne has another row of ancient cottages called Winkle Street, next to a former sheep dip.

Many of the historic amusements have fallen into the sea at Blackgang Chine, but it continues to entertain children of all ages. The stretch of coast to the west is where dinosaur bones are found, especially after a cliff fall. The future of the A3055 military coastal road is uncertain in places, nearer Freshwater Bay it has fallen into the sea less than 200 years after its construction. Freshwater sprawls, but one of its sons is at last achieving fame: Robert Hooke, whose father was the rector in the 1640s. One who came to live on the island in the 1850s for peace and quiet was Lord Tennyson; he lived long enough to become such a tourist attraction that by the 1880s he had to leave the island for peace and quiet in the summer. A personality best known today for her photography is Julia Margaret Cameron, and a visit to Dimbola Lodge is essential for any interested in this art.

The National Trust manages 10% of the Island and looks after Mottistone Manor house, known to many as the home of Lord Seely whose horse Warrior survived the First World War with him despite being under fire many times. Seely was responsible for unearthing the Tudor Manor House and restoring it following a landslide. The Trust also owns the Old and New Needles Batteries. The Old Battery guarded the western approaches to Southampton and Portsmouth and gives excellent views of the Needles. The New Battery has recently been opened up with information on its role in the Second World War. Nearby was the testing ground for the ill-fated Black Knight rocket, which fired successfully and was promptly scrapped.

The remaining land on the north coast of the Island is a haven for bird watchers especially Newtown harbour. Fort Victoria, to the west of Yarmouth, with displays on the underwater archaeology and an example of the huge investment the Victorians felt they had to make in national defences. Yarmouth and Cowes have delightful houses as well as relics of older buildings. East Cowes has the Classic Boat museum, reached by a floating bridge from (west) Cowes. Cowes has other sailing collections. The Steam Railway has its headquarters in Haven Street, and is notable for its excellent restoration of early carriages,



Erosion to the car park at Compton Bay, off the Military Road on the Isle of Wight.

all at least 75 years old, and one dating from the 1860s.

Newport's Museum of Island History in the old Guildhall is disgracefully only open two days a week, these times do not reflect the interesting exhibits owned by the island. In happier times valuable buildings towards the Quay have been preserved, and a walk round Newport will reward an observant historian with many delightful eighteenth and nineteenth century houses. The Bus Museum has occasional days when rides can be taken as well as housing static exhibits.

Many visitors still think the island lives in the past. Outside the summer season, it has a reasonable bus service for a rural area. Further economy cuts leading to more dependence on volunteers could threaten much of what makes the island such an enjoyable place not just for a holiday but for historical exploration, often unravelled by the 12 local history societies, all of which welcome visitors to their meetings. And of course, so does the local Branch of the Historical Association whose own history is recorded on the HA's site: www.history.org.uk

The question I am asked most frequently by visitors from abroad is how the island got its name. While Wight comes from the Roman name Vectis, its earlier origin is still disputed. Not Veni, vidi, vici, but: I came, I saw and stayed.

Martin is a former committee member of the Island Historical Association branch, and Terry has been its secretary for many years. Both are Fellows of the Historical Association.



Wolverton manor



Isle of Wight Steam Railway



Bembridge windmill