

Bricks and Mortar – a short walk through the history of Cowes

Brief history of Cowes

In the 13th century, the area of Cowes was known as Shamblord (OE meaning ledge or sloping shore?) and was a collection of cottages in marshy land. The origin of the name “Cowes” is uncertain, but one theory is that it is a term describing sandbanks off the coast. The term was in use before the building of Henry VIII’s castles in East and West Cowes in 1539 to 1540 which encouraged further development on both sides of the Medina.

Boat and ship building have taken place here since at least the reign of Elizabeth I, with rapid growth of the fishing village in the 17th and 18th centuries as quays, houses and alleyways were built. Cowes was also a useful watering and revictualling stop-over for merchant ships en route between Europe and the American colonies – they could also clear customs here. Goods included rice from Carolina, ginger from Jamaica and elephants’ teeth from New York. Ships found it more convenient to drop anchor off Cowes than to fight their way into Southampton or Portsmouth.

In the 18th century, the village was centred around the High Street, with roads such as Market Hill and Sun Hill leading off one side and quays the other. Shooters Hill was a lane leading to a marshy area where birds were hunted, and the village was surrounded by farmland.

The 19th century saw the village transform into a town, with terraces of red and yellow brick houses built inland to house shipyard workers, many working at JS White’s which opened in Cowes’ Thetis Yard in 1815, eventually employing as many as 5,000 people.

The 19th century also saw large mansions built near to the shore as second homes or main residences of aristocrats, royalty and wealthy industrialists –, the trend for sea bathing, the growth of yachting plus the presence of Queen Victoria in Osborne House all contributed to make Cowes a very fashionable place to live, stay and be seen.

On this walk you are going to finish by seeing some of the grand 19th century buildings of Cowes. But on the way to the Esplanade you will look at some of Cowes’ other buildings of interest as a way of illustrating the history and growth of the town.

We are heavily indebted to John Groves of the Cowes Heritage group, as much of the information produced here was gleaned from his fascinating book “Cowes, the jewel of the Solent”.

Shooters Hill

- **Jolliffes** – now a gallery and tea shop run, this was an exclusive shoe shop boasting a sought-after royal warrant for making shoes for Queen

Victoria. The beautiful art-nouveau front replaced the original frontage burnt down in 1914.

High Street

- **The Anchor** – this famous yachting pub started life in the early 1700s as a hostelry called The Three Trumpeters. Built like many early Cowes houses from ships' timbers and cow dung, it became the prime coaching inn in Cowes in the second half of the 18th century, until the Fountain was rebuilt in its present form in 1804, and took over the trade. By the 1820s, the pub was called the Anchor, it is believed after the anchor bought ashore from his ship and fixed to the front wall of the pub by a master mariner who owned it.
- **Sainsburys** – originally a private dwelling – Wilton House – by the 1890s this building had been acquired by Charles Brown, a yacht provisioner supplying bonded stores (duty free wine, spirits, tobacco etc) to visiting yachts. This shows how popular yachting had become by the latter 19th century
- **Middleton Terrace** – as the shipyards such as Shephards Wharf grew, the population of Cowes quadrupled in the 19th century, and speculators started building courts of terraced housing in the back gardens of High Street houses. One such court was the Thrunge – slang for sewer drain – now Middleton Terrace. Originally two terraces facing each other, 6 feet apart – 2 up, 2 down, with a shared outside toilet in a communal shed over a cesspit, and a shared water tap with running water 3 hours a day. The court was dirty, dank and rat-infested, a sanctuary for criminals.
- **Terminus Road** – this road was originally called Hog Lane, possibly because of the number of slaughterhouses operating in the area. It was renamed Terminus Road following the opening of the Cowes to Newport railway in 1862 – sadly the railway closed in 1966. The station stood on the site of the Co-op store, and the line ran to Newport via Mill Hill station (where Arctic Park is now).
- **St Thomas of Canterbury** – one of the first catholic churches built following the 1791 Catholic Relief Act which allowed Catholics to build plain chapels, with the proviso that the doors were never locked. The church was built through a £2,800 gift from Mrs Elizabeth Heneage. The more eye-catching portico was added after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1831.
- **The Fountain** – the present buildings date from 1804, and made the Fountain Cowes' premier coaching inn. The Arcade was part of the hotel, with the ground floor being reception and dining rooms. The tourist information office was originally a tap room for coachmen. Guest rooms were on the first floor, with servants' quarters in the attic above. The hotel was also handily positioned for people arriving at Fountain Quay by steamboat
- **Marex House and Brew House** – one of Cowes' oldest houses, it was originally built out of ship's timbers, then brick faced in the Georgian style – a very handsome house. The adjoining shop was taken over by Mew Langtons the Newport brewers in the 1850s and they exported

beer to the mainland from the quay behind the shop (and imported it to Cowes from Newport!)

- **The Prospect** – when Ratsey & Lapthorn the sailmakers owned this building in the 1790s, it was known as Bellevue Quay. It stayed in their hands till 1958 when it was purchased by Sir Max Aitken, son of Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the Express newspaper. Sir Max set up and competed in the Cowes to Torquay powerboat race, and before his death in 1985 established the museum displaying some of his large collection of maritime memorabilia.
- **Market Hill & Town Hall & War Memorial** – on the site of the modern flats was the Town Hall, built in 1816, showing how the town was growing. The ground floor was a covered market place, and the first floor was the council chamber. In the square below the Town Hall stood the War Memorial, erected of Cornish granite through public subscription in 1921. Both Town Hall and memorial were destroyed in the Cowes blitz of May 1942. The surviving pieces of the memorial were moved to Northwood Park.
- **Benzies** – this international jewellers was founded here in 1862 by Mr Simpson Benzie. He lived above the shop and also created his jewel-encrusted maritime pieces on site. He set his timepieces by looking over to Portsmouth from his tower room; from there he could see the dropping of a ball in Portsmouth which followed a midday signal from Greenwich. Lord Louis Mountbatten, unable to gain membership to the Royal Yacht Squadron, would watch Cowes Week racing from the tower. He was finally elected to the RYS in 1943 after being previously blackballed because of his playboy image.
- **Island Sailing Club** – a sign of the growth of yachting among classes other than the aristocracy was the establishment of the Island Sailing Club in 1889 for racing dinghies and smaller open boats. The club was quite progressive, allowing women members, and in 1930 started up the Round the Island Race. The first race attracted 104 yachts, a far cry from the near 1,800 that took part in 2009.
- **Bath Rd** – named after **Hewitts'** (no 74) bath house, established in 1790 offering "hot plunging and salt water baths". Following the decline of the bath business in the latter part of the 19th century, Hewitts expanded into groceries, and was able to display a royal warrant for supplying blended tea to Queen Victoria. "Royal Osborne Mixture" was the speciality. Hewitts was destroyed in May 1942 by the Luftwaffe.
- **The Union** – an 18th century pub, and a notorious haunt of the press gangs. These gangs could legally kidnap working men – usually when they were drunk – make them serve up to 15 years in the Royal Navy, leaving the men's families destitute until they returned often minus a limb or two! Also a smugglers' den, as evidenced by tunnels and secret chambers found under the building.
- **Customs Watch House** – there has been a watch house here since 1703, and the customs house itself moved here from Birmingham Road in the 1880s, having been over in East Cowes before that.

The Parade - the quays and boathouses were replaced by buildings of gentility as yachting became all the rage in the 19th century. Along with an

upgraded Queens Road, the Parade in its present layout was opened by Queen Victoria in 1898. Victoria Pier was opened in 1902, and was demolished in 1961.

- **The Globe** – another Cowes pub to survive for over 200 years. In the early 1800s it was a rough dockside pub, and such was the violence there that a military law was enacted forbidding sailors to bring knives ashore, or soldiers to bring bayonets out of their barracks. It was rather more respectable later in the century as it became the Freemasons Lodge.
- **Marine Hotel** – an elegant 100 room hotel stood on the site of these new flats. It was highly fashionable in the 19th century particularly after the Royal Yacht Squadron moved into Cowes Castle in 1855 – among its guests were Napoleon III, the Prince of Wales and the Crown Prince of Saxony
- **Royal London Yacht Club** – founded in 1838 for sailing on the Thames. As the river silted up and became more and more polluted by sewage, members started sailing in regattas on the Solent, but as wealthy industrialists they found the aristocratic Royal Yacht Squadron closed to them. The solution was to purchase a club house in Cowes, and 1 /2 Marine Parade was bought in 1882, part of a row of 6 19th century balconied houses known as the Terrace. Osborne Ct - built in 1935 – stands on the site of the rest of the Terrace.
- **The Gloster** – these flats stand on the site of the Gloster Hotel, named after the Duke of Gloucester's visit to Cowes in 1812. Prior to moving into Cowes Castle, the Royal Yacht Squadron was based here from 1825 to 1855.
- **Castle Rock** - now clubhouse for the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, this building has a colourful history. In the 19th century it was home to the Cust family – they had several royal connections, members of the family being major-domo at Osborne House, captain of the royal yacht "Victoria and Albert", and equerry to King George V. Legend has it the Margaret Thatcher is the grand daughter of one Henry Cust, who may have had an illegitimate daughter with a serving maid at Belton Castle near Grantham – the serving maid left her post and was given enough money to buy a corner grocer's shop!

In 1925 Castle Rock was purchased by Rosa Lewis, mistress of the future Edward VII. Rosa owned the Cavendish Hotel in Grosvenor Square, and the TV series "The duchess of Duke St" was based on her life. Because of her reputation, Rosa was refused entrance to Cowes' royal sailing clubs – she held wild parties on the lawns of Castle Rock within sight and sound of the rather more staid Yacht Squadron lawns!

In the 1940s, Castle Rock at last gained respectability when it was purchased as the club house for the Burnham-on-Sea based Royal Corinthian Yacht Club.

- **Hippersley House** – in recent times the ballroom and annexe of the Royal Yacht Squadron, this house was designed by John Nash in 1824 as a marine villa for Sir William Cox-Hippersley.

- **Cowes Castle** – built around 1540 along with a similar castle in East Cowes to protect the Medina from French invasion. The only conflict that the castle witnessed was the English Civil War – in 1642 a cannon was fired at a parliamentary ship blockading the Solent ports, but eventually the royalist captain of the castle and his troops surrendered to the parliamentarians. The castle became redundant in the 1850s and was leased to the Marquis of Conyngham and then the Royal Yacht Squadron.

The RYS originated as a yacht club founded in 1815 in London by aristocrats such as the Earl of Yarborough, the first Commodore, who owned their own racing cutters. After basing themselves in local pubs, and for 20 years in the Gloster Hotel, the Squadron found its permanent home. By this time it had changed its name from the Royal Yacht Club to the Royal Yacht Squadron under the patronage of King William IV, the sailor king, and the Squadron's first Admiral.

The Castle was refurbished by architect Anthony Salvin in the late 1850s – he had already overseen the restoration of Windsor Castle and the Tower of London.

The RYS landing stairs were built – for use by the Squadron and royalty – in 1883, while the 22 brass cannon used to start Cowes Week races originated on William IV's model warship Royal Adelaide, which sunk in Virginia Water in 1834.

During WW2, the Castle and nearby buildings were offered to the admiralty. From 1942 as HMS Vectis, the castle became the HQ of J Force which was part of the D Day invasion fleet onto Juno Beach. The Parade was shut off to the public and patrolled by the military.

Northwood House

George Ward moved to the Island in 1793 as the new owner of Bellevue, a large house on the hill overlooking Cowes. He continued to purchase local land and property and by 1813 had become the lord of Debourne Manor, which included much of Cowes from Birmingham Hall (in modern day Birmingham Rd) to Three Gates to Egypt Cliff.

In the early 19th century, George Ward contracted the architect John Nash to design the Ward Tower for Cowes Chapel (now St Marys Church), and had Nash draw up plans to redesign Bellevue into the fine Georgian mansion we now know as Northwood House – he drew up preliminary plans in 1832, and the final designs were undertaken by George Mair in 1836 – 7.

In the later 19th century, the house became impractically large for the Ward family – Edmund Granville Ward moved to Egypt House – and a number of leases followed. These included a group of nuns in 1901 –

the path above the tennis courts is still called the Nun's Walk – and the British Red Cross as a convalescent home during WWI.

In 1929, Herbert Joseph Ward, JP and Chairman of Isle of Wight County Council, donated the House to the people of Cowes. It has served as a Council administrative centre and registry office – what future use can IW Council – which now maintains it – put it to in future?

Queens Road – created in 1829 following the closure of a ropewalk that ran along its course.

- **Thornhill** – this house has a very distinguished history, having been built for the Duke of Norfolk around 1845, and later owned by Arthur Guinness, who was a keen yachtsman. The house is on the site of Corke's Lodgings which numbered Horatio Nelson and Emma Hamilton amongst its guests – in 1805 the house was renamed Trafalgar. In 1951 the house was purchased by the Royal Yacht Squadron as additional accommodation for members, and it is now private flats.
- **Holy Trinity Church** – completed in 1832 as a gift from Mrs Goodwin of Grove House (now Stanhope Lodge) to her daughter and son-in-law, a clergyman called Maximilian Geneste. It cost £6,687, which equates to over half a million pounds today. The clock was installed in 1837 to celebrate the coronation of Queen Victoria. Rev Geneste was the incumbent till 1860.

The myrtle bush beside the door originated as a cutting from one of Queen Victoria's bridesmaid's wreaths.

Known as the Yachtsmen's Church, it features many plaques and memorials to Royal Yacht Squadron members. There is also a memorial to the yachtsmen who died in the 1979 Fastnet Race, consisting of three pieces of rock from the Fastnet in the shape of a yacht.

- **The Grantham** – built on the site of Grantham House, a 19th century mansion built for Lord Grantham. It was bought in 1861 by George Robert Stephenson, nephew of George Stephenson – inventor of the Rocket – and a successful and wealthy engineer in his own right. Off the coast he built a swimming tank which was perforated so that seawater entered at every high tide. For many years after WW2, the Grantham was a hotel, and it was THE place in Cowes to have your wedding reception. The house was demolished in 1991.
- **Prince's Green** – George Robert Stephenson gave £500 to enable the Board of Health to buy and maintain two acres of land on the sea front, in celebration of the wedding of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark in 1863.

The cast iron drinking fountain was also presented to the town by Mr Stephenson to commemorate the Prince of Wales' marriage.

At some point a bandstand was installed along with a statue of the Roman goddess Flora. The statue was removed from the Green for safety at the beginning of WW2 and was promptly forgotten about till it was rediscovered in a cupboard in Northwood House in 1979. It was restored using money raised by children at Love Lane Primary School, and can now be found in an alcove at Northwood House.

- **Mariners** – previously known as Marina, this house, one of Queens Road's oldest, was built around 1820 for George IV's Surgeon General. The king was apparently overweight and unhealthy and needed his doctor to be in attendance when he stayed in Cowes.
- **The Boathouse** – this cottage was built to accommodate servants working at Stanhope House, and a boat. It was allegedly once rented out to a lady who ran an aristocratic "disorderly house" during Cowes Week in the 19th century – the authorities approved as prostitution was contained to this house, and police ensured that nobody but the gentry were allowed in!
- **Mornington** – this new development stands on the site of Mornington, which was built as Mornington Hall in the 1830s for the Countess of Mornington – her husband, the Earl of Mornington was a grandson of the Duke of Wellington. Its last owner before demolition was Air Commodore Nance.
- **Rosetta** – Rosetta Cottage started life as the works office for one of the ropewalks of Cowes. (The most famous ropewalk was at the bottom of Mill Hill Rd, established by Bannisters in 1820, taken over by JS Whites, and closed as recently as 1965). This one was 1,000 feet long and ran eastwards from the cottage along what is now Queens Rd – it closed after its owner Thomas Godsell's death in 1815.

In 1873 Rosetta was rented for Cowes Week by Mr Leonard Jerome, millionaire proprietor of the New York Times. The family were invited to a ball on the guard ship Ariadne which was anchored off Cowes. Jenny, the eldest daughter danced with Lord Randolph Churchill – they were obviously smitten as he proposed three days later, and they married in Paris in April 1874. Their son Winston was born in November of the same year.

- **Lisburne** – this was built in the late 1870s as the summer residence of the Countess of Lisburne. Among other residents over the years have been Mr Pascal Atkey, owner of the High St chandlers, and the Danish Royal Family, whose neighbours in Tanglin in 1878 were the Liddell family, including their daughter Alice – who became the model for Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland.
- **Shore End** – in the 1860s, the Royal Yacht Squadron bought up land next to Cowes Castle to use as its lawns, forcing the land's previous occupants – Hamlet Baths – to close. The West Cowes Sea Bathing Company opened in its place – as well as sea bathing, the building offered hot, plunging and vapour baths. The front of the house featured a long walkway, with the gentlemen's entrance on the left and the ladies' on the right.

- **Holmwood** – built in 1870 for Charles Maw, owner of a chain of chemist shops. The house's later uses included a pre-war hotel and a nursing home in the 1940s. Since the mid-50s it has operated as a hotel again under a number of owners, being refurbished as the New Holmwood in 1990.
- **Egypt House** – built in the 1770s. In the early 1800s, many of the gentry – including William IV – spent the sailing season here.

In 1857 the house was bought by Robert White, enlarged and opened as an academy for the sons of gentlemen, preparing them for a career in the army, navy, church or civil service.