

## ISLE OF WIGHT – LATE SUMMER 2015

### Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> September

With regard to the title, I would like to explain that I favour the astronomical calendar of seasons over the meteorological one, as in this case it means I can hold onto summer for a few weeks longer. It *is* possible I may go meteorological for spring, but generally speaking I like the phrase *vernal equinox* too much. Anyway, it was a 06:00 start for us on an overcast morning in late summer.

Amazingly, we managed to set off by 07:50 and had a more or less smooth journey, with just one quick 'comfort stop' round about Ringwood (and I'm pretty sure there was a roundabout involved). There had been some rain along the way, but the sky was very changeable with lots of different clouds of varying depth and density, interspersed with some welcome blue.

There were a couple of very slow-moving hold-ups as we progressed and there was some real concern about being late for the ferry. Finally, though, we entered Southampton and by sheer good fortune, Alan managed to turn right in the nick of time to the Red Funnel docking area, rather than cruising right past it into frustration and panic. It wasn't long before we boarded the *Red Falcon* and enjoyed a smooth crossing to the Isle of Wight, complete with a rather good cappuccino to complement the rolls and crisps we'd brought with us for lunch.

We were the fourth car to leave the ferry and drive onto East Cowes. This was Alan's first trip to the Isle of Wight, but I had made a couple of quick visits in the latter 60s when holidaying at Portsmouth. However, I have almost no memory of those visits and so it was all new to me as well, except the recognisable place names. I love place names, they really seem to say something about a place.

We had a couple of hours to wait until we could collect our chalet keys, so after a brief stop at Newport for no particular reason, we drove on to Ventnor on the south coast where the chalet was to be found. We parked on the sea front for a stroll, where there was a stiff onshore breeze, to put it politely.



**Windy Ventnor beach**

Ventnor gave a general impression of being a very seasidey place, with beach huts and various types of food on offer, including ice cream. I noticed that it was slightly run-down in places, with a boarded-up amusement arcade (which is not necessarily a bad thing) and an empty, derelict building.

It was soon time to collect our chalet keys and buy some food from a small local supermarket. We parked nearby, but were both so tired that we forgot to pay the car park fee. I don't think that's a believable excuse these days, but it was the truth. Fortunately, the chalet itself was very close by and we were soon able to unpack and make some much desired tea.

The outstanding advantage of the chalet was its brilliant sea view from halfway up a hill. This gave me a feeling of safety from the elements, as I had no doubt there'd be elemental experiences to come. For the first afternoon, though, it was wonderfully relaxing simply to sit and watch the sea with all its various shipping, including a Brittany Ferries vessel. Oh for some binoculars...



**Tea, but no binoculars**

It was almost a shame when it became dark and the nuances of the water's constant motion were temporarily lost from sight. However, there was definite compensation in the form of the many lights of an ocean cruise liner on its way to Southampton and a couple of other lit-up vessels on the horizon. Our holiday in Aosta had delighted me with mountain-watch, but I could already tell that the Isle of Wight was going to delight me with sea-watch 😊

**Best bit:** *Discovering the amazing sea view*

**Worst bit:** *Traffic congestion in the Southampton area*

### **Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September**

Alan slept well, but I'd describe my night's sleep as restless and spasmodic, not to mention frustrating because of a last mug of tea too close to bedtime. When I finally got up at 06:35, though, there was a lovely sunrise glow to the far left of our sea view and I sat and read my book in between watching a small fishing boat close inshore that was motoring purposefully around in a large circle.

Our vague plan to visit the local botanical gardens was made definite when we saw the next day's weather forecast was for wind and rain. After getting to grips with new accommodation strangeness, like having to boil water in the kettle for washing in, because we hadn't properly turned on the water heater, we were ready in good time. It was a bit of a wrench to tear my gaze away from the compelling sea view, but I was really looking forward to Ventnor Botanic Garden.

It was only a ten-minute drive away and we managed to arrive bang on opening time at 10:00. Since the Plantation Room Café was near the entrance, we were the first customers of the day, but not that we were desperate for a decent, hot, comforting cappuccino, or anything. It was all of those things actually, but I felt a bit uncomfortable as the only customers sitting in a room that appeared to be a part-library. Maybe we should have sat outside on the wooden terrace that overlooked the garden, but it was a bit too cool and overcast.

Still, there was plenty to explore and we soon set off to the large area devoted to Australia and New Zealand. As the whole garden is situated in what's known as the Undercliff, protected from northerly winds by Ventnor's chalk downs, it has its own microclimate that's comparable to the Mediterranean. This allows subtropical plants to grow outside unprotected, as frost is rarely experienced. There's a lot to be said for a cosy southerly coastal position.

There was also a lot to enjoy as we wandered among the Antipodean planting, remarking on unusual features and taking the odd photo or twenty. We came across only a few other people at this stage, which added to the sense of wellbeing. There is something so calming about walking through a garden, something intrinsically beneficial that brings about a certain tranquillity of the soul. Plus, we really like taking photos of flowers, plants and trees.



**Calming flowers**

After dallying along Hydrangea Dell, a Palm Garden and a South African Terrace, we found ourselves at the Long Border. There were swathes of bright colour both sides of a path, as so many flowers were still flamboyantly in bloom, offering pollen to many bees that were clearly enamoured with this border – as were we.

However, as it was midday and we were right by the *edulis* café and restaurant, we went inside for some lunch. The word *edulis* is Latin for edible plant and all salad is brought in twice daily fresh from the garden, whereas other food is locally sourced and super-fresh. What's not to like? We liked it a great deal, me with my cheese and cucumber baguette and Alan with his smoked salmon salad with capers. We were both impressed with the whole ethos of the place and as Alan remarked, the food felt 'clean'. A thumbs up for *edulis*!

Feeling that everything was a significant bit better in the world, we continued to enjoy the Long Border and then the Mediterranean Garden. The clouds were acting a little skittishly in the sky and there seemed to be more of them appearing, but we followed a track to where the garden joined a coastal path down to Steephill Cove (although it was partly closed).

There was also a closed tunnel that led to the coast and it was here that I realised Ventnor Botanic Garden used to be the Royal National Hospital for Diseases of the Chest, opened in 1869 and eventually closed in 1964, when tuberculosis had ceased to be a major problem. The tunnel had been used to give patients wheelchair access to the beach, where the atmosphere was considered beneficial to their enjoyment and their recovery.

We decided to concentrate on the planting rather than the coastal path and our meandering took us to the Arid Garden, which was really special with its wonderful agaves and aloes. There was a huge naturalised area containing the Ventnor Hybrid Agapanthus, which must have been beautiful when the flowers were at their very best. Agapanthus is probably my favourite flower of all time. In fact, the whole garden was reminding me of Tresco Abbey Garden, which is probably my favourite garden of all time, so it was a win-win situation.

There was a Heritage Centre nearby, exhibiting artefacts, photos and diary entries from staff and patients of the former hospital that were really quite enlightening. I felt sorry for the patients with what they'd had to endure, but the general feeling was that the hospital in that particular location was a good place to be. Not every chest hospital had direct access to a beach after all.

Once outside again, we started to feel a few drops of rain and since we'd more or less seen everything we wanted (and had been there for 4+ hours), it was time to head to the gift shop and exit. The rain never did come to much, but we were quite happy to return to the chalet for a mug of tea and to check on the sea state, where white horses were very much in evidence.

As it was only mid-afternoon, Alan suggested a walk to the shore road below. It was blowing considerably down by the sea and waves were breaking against the rocks with high plumes of spray. We didn't linger, but it was an invigorating walk along the esplanade and back up the steep hill to the chalet, to sit inside where it was warm and enjoy sea-watch with a glass of wine. As well as a Brittany Ferries vessel, we espied a Condor Ferries one – result!

Tea was simple and the evening was relaxing. It had definitely been a good day.

**Best bit:** *Flowers and lunch*

**Worst bit:** *The wind down at the sea front*

### **Monday 14<sup>th</sup> September**

We went to bed last night lulled by the distant roar of the wind, with squally rain hitting the windows sporadically. It must have suited me well, because I slept far better than the previous night. The bed is definitely very comfortable.

The weather showed signs of clearing as we were having breakfast at about 08:00, although it was still windy. The destination for the day was Newport Roman Villa, with a coffee break at the nearby Marks & Spencer store. The drive there only took around 30 minutes and we were soon sipping a welcome cappuccino in a spacious and comfortable café area.

We discovered the Roman Villa was literally up the road and were able to park close by. It was a great visit – a little low-key, but I was impressed to learn as soon as I went in, that the word 'villa' comes from the Latin word for a country house with farm buildings around a courtyard. Our words 'village' and 'villain' derive from 'villa' and a 'villein' was a class of serf tied to the feudal system.

The remains of the villa had been fortuitously discovered in 1926, when a nearby house sank foundations to build a garage. The villa had been built around 280 AD and contained a very well-preserved bath suite, complete with hypocaust underfloor heating. It was all presented in a clear and informative way and we were fortunate to be the only people there for quite a while, so were able to take our time reading the information boards and photographing the various rooms of the bath suite in peace. These started from the *apodyterium* (changing room), to the *frigidarium* (cold plunge pool), to the *tepidarium* (warm bath), to the *sudatorium* (sweating room) and the *caldarium* (hot bath).



**The Apodyterium (changing room)**

There was also a large room with a tessellated floor and murals, plus the intriguing addition of a fireplace. This was unusual and presumed to have been included later, as its hearth rests upon the floor. Other reconstructed rooms, including a kitchen, showed what life would have been like with its Roman-style emphasis on the *convivium*, where the enjoyment of conversation, food and drink would have been paramount. A few life-sized models added to the scenes.

All of this was under cover, but there were more remains of rooms outside. Talking of remains, the skull of a woman in her early 30s had been found during excavation, possibly killed during a raid. A small garden based on gardens found well-preserved under the ash of Pompeii was also very pleasing. In fact, I was so impressed and in the Roman spirit of things, that when it began to rain and we took cover in the small shop, I did a crayon-rubbing of some Roman coins in the small interactive section there. It was a small site as sites go, but I liked it!

It was midday by the time we left, so we decided to return to the M & S just down the road for some lunch. It was busy, but we found a corner table for two and enjoyed tomato and basil soup with bread roll and butter (me) and squash, rainbow vegetables and grain salad (Alan).

All morning there had been showers of fine rain and an almost constant wind, but with plenty of sunny intervals too, so we decided it was good enough to pay a visit to nearby Carisbrooke Castle, a drive of less than ten minutes. First impressions as we approached were of a well-maintained and intriguing historical fortification that scored a well-rounded 8 out of 10 on the *Castles Worth Investigating Scale*. I already knew it was significant as the castle where King Charles I had been imprisoned during the Civil War in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century shortly before his execution, so was looking forward to a bit of hands-on history.



**A castle fit for a king's imprisonment**

As we passed through the gatehouse to the courtyard and into the guardhouse, the wind seemed to spring up with truculent intent. It was easy to imagine what it must have been like to live in such a draughty, unwelcoming place when not safely inside one of the rooms in close proximity to a crackling, well-lit fireplace.

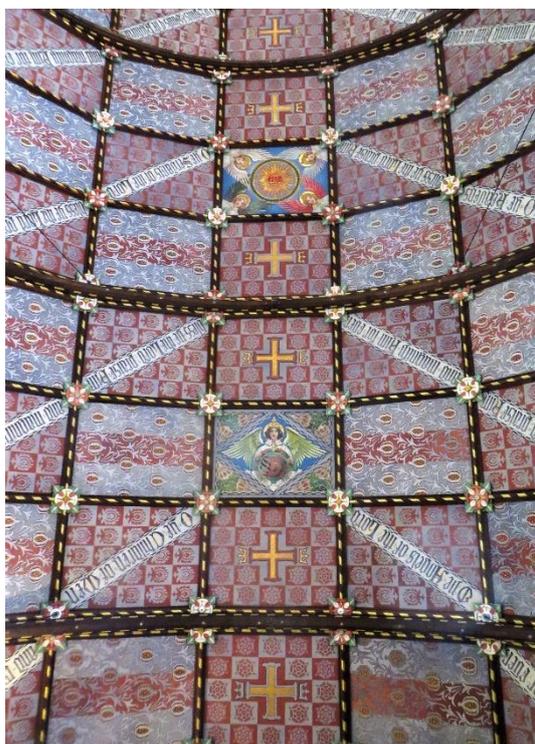
A short film in the guardhouse was informative, so I came away knowing a lot more of the castle's history. Its earliest certain use was as a 6<sup>th</sup>-century pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery, although Roman occupation was possible. At around 1000 AD, the prominent hilltop became the site of a fortress/fortified settlement (an Anglo-Saxon *burh*) formed of an earthen bank surrounded by a stone wall and containing large timber buildings, built as a refuge from Viking raids.

After the Norman Conquest, the *burh* was converted into a castle with a defended enclosure. From 1100, it belonged to the de Redvers family and descendants, who improved it with stone walls, a keep and towers. In 1293, the splendidly named Countess Isabella de Fortibus sold it to King Edward I and it was then in the care of wardens as representatives of the Crown.

The Isle of Wight was raided five times from 1336 to 1370 and was besieged in 1377. With the threat of Spanish invasion in the latter 16<sup>th</sup> century, a major artillery fort was created but was never used in action. The main action and area of interest for me, though, was the Civil War and the shenanigans of Charles I, as I had just finished reading about that time period in Philippa Gregory's novel *Virgin Earth*. I was also interested to learn that Princess Beatrice, Victoria and Albert's youngest daughter, had lived at the castle from 1896 to 1944.

The weather was still verging on volatile when we emerged from the guardhouse, but it was only a short distance to the pleasingly named small chapel of St-Nicholas-in-Castro. Here we sheltered at what is the war memorial for the Isle of Wight, amid history and wonderful ceilings. The chapel itself had been rebuilt in 1904-05 by the aptly named local architect Percy Stone, to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Charles I's execution. The pews had been made from one of the last wooden warships, *HMS Nettle*.

The two ceilings, one in the chapel itself and the other in the small porch were the *tour de force* for me, so I was a little bemused at how many people appeared not to look up with appropriate awe, or even to look up at all. The sight of Alan kneeling by the pews with his camera pointing upward did seem to result in more glances heavenward, though – and the ceilings were really quite heavenly. I have to say I found it very hard to take decent photos of these masterpieces, but at least they serve as a reminder:



**Ceiling appreciation - the left in the chapel and the right in the porch**

We did attempt a walk outside to look at intriguing features on the guide map called 'Isabella's window' and 'Charles I's window', but as I was reading an information board by the latter, the rain came and the wind disoblingly blew it right into our faces. We therefore gave up and headed across to investigate the Constable's Lodging, (where Charles I had initially been imprisoned, albeit with a significant amount of privileges), the Great Hall and the Museum.

Charles I (who in my opinion from what I have read tended to behave like a self-centred idiot with delusions of deity), attempted to escape through the bars of his bedroom window, but failed to allow for the size of his body and must have become ignominiously stuck. Although the bedroom itself had naturally been modernised over the years, it still had some original features and it felt pretty amazing to be standing where King Charles I had slept, while no doubt pondering his escape and plotting his return to power.

The other stand-out feature for me was the wonderful museum that not only housed the emotive *Wight at War* exhibition to commemorate the centenary of World War I, but also contained some amazing Charles I memorabilia, including two letters written by the man himself during his enforced stay at Carisbrooke. For the rest of the day I kept thinking with something akin to smug disbelief: 'I have seen some handwriting of Charles I'.

We were able to take advantage of some blue sky for a photo or two prior to leaving, but the wind remained strong and by the time we returned to Ventnor to resume sea-watch, there were so many white horses racing madly across the turbulent water that I wondered if the cross-channel ferries would still be running. I was somewhat surprised a short while later to see the faithful Brittany Ferries vessel chugging along determinedly and more than a little sorry for those passengers on board, some of whom might be suffering from *mal de mer*.

The wind died down a little after our tea of baked potato and tuna followed by a Solero, but it sprang up again during the evening. The temperature fell and the rain was beating against the windows every so often, but it was quite cosy watching *Doc Martin* on the sofa under a spare duvet from the bedroom!

**Best bit:** *All the history*

**Worst bit:** *Rain curtailing our outside exploration of Carisbrooke Castle ☹*

### **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> September**

Exactly mid-September and we awoke to similar weather conditions as when we'd gone to bed, although the sea view made it seem interesting and dramatic rather than putting a dampener on the day. Besides, as we breakfasted at leisure and deliberated about where to go, the rain abated and we eventually proceeded to make sandwiches for two proposed visits.

As it turned out, there was a slight misunderstanding about our itinerary and after driving through Shanklin (full of tourists) and Sandown, we arrived at Bembridge Windmill, on the east coast. It was a National Trust property and the only surviving windmill on the island, built around 1700 and last operated in 1913 – and a right old cold and draughty place it was too! True, this might have had something to do with the appropriate high wind and the fact that windmills don't really do it for me. That is, they look quite romantic and pretty, but...



**Side view of Bembridge Windmill**

To be fair, this once fully-functioning four-storey corn mill had been restored and it was almost fun climbing up and down the nearly vertical ladders. It remains a fact, though, that machinery isn't really my thing. The windmill had been painted (in the artistic sense) by Turner in 1795, so it was worth a visit, but I was glad to leave the creaking and groaning of the four sails and return to the car.

It wasn't too difficult to make our way to Brading Roman Villa and as it was 11:30 when we arrived, we sat in the car and ate our sandwiches. The weather had been steadily improving and there was much blueness of sky, although the wind was reluctant to drop. Once inside, we made our way to the Forum Café for a cappuccino (aptly from Italy, like the Romans) and looked around with interest at the Roman-style menu. I regretted having already eaten and almost wished we had a child with us to find out what constituted a Wicked Roman lunch bag.

For the next two hours in the undercover exhibition and visitor centre that housed the excavated remains of the villa, we were ensconced in a world of mosaics, Roman gods and goddesses and artefacts. The villa's history was cleverly presented within the context of the Isle of Wight's history and I also found it very satisfying to identify mosaics of Perseus, Andromeda, Medusa, Orpheus and many more from the excellent information boards.

The villa had been discovered in 1879, when a farmer called William Munns was digging post holes for a sheep pen and discovered a mosaic floor depicting a man with the head of a cockerel. This famous cock-headed mosaic known as *Gallus* (Latin for cockerel) is presumed to be a caricature of a gladiator trainer (*Lanista*). Amateur archaeologist Captain John Thorp helped to excavate, but when the importance of the site was realised, professionals were brought in.

The Romans called the Isle of Wight *Vectis* and its inhabitants were therefore *Vectensians*, but by Saxon times (according to the Venerable Bede), islanders were calling themselves *Victuari*. Since German-speaking Saxons pronounced the *V* as *W*, *Vectis* morphed into *Wiht* and then *Wight*. I do love a bit of name derivation. I also loved the fact that we could wander around at our own pace and take as many pictures as we felt the need – and as usual, we felt the need.



**A Time Team dig circa 1880**

I noticed that there were several presumed volunteers connected with the site who were engaging in conversation with people/visitors. I overheard one such volunteer ask a slightly startled visitor: "Hello! Are you enjoying your visit? Do you have any questions?" Since that last question is guaranteed to erase any lurking questions from my entire brain, I skilfully managed to evade all such volunteers for the entire rest of our visit there.

No doubt I was denying myself some extremely interesting information, but I find a great deal of enjoyment indulging in a spot of solitary wandering. At one point, I overheard Alan having a brief encounter with one such volunteer and somehow managing to slip in a mention about our visit to Fishbourne Roman Palace in Hampshire, so Roman kudos to him!

There were a few other areas to be viewed outside in the grounds, with some objects of interest that included a well (in which bodies had been found), a hypocaust (not as good as the one at Newport Roman Villa) and a garden (in which Alan greatly admired a strawberry tree). Several other visitors were wandering around outside, no doubt enjoying the improved weather conditions, or to be precise, a great deal less wind.

It was only around 14:00 by the time we were ready to leave what had been a fascinating site, so we decided to find The Devil's Punchbowl, described in our booklet as a Bronze Age burial mound in a hedgerow. In view of the number of hedgerows we came across in our search, it felt more like finding a needle in a haystack and despite following directions, we failed to find anything remotely resembling a fingerbowl, let alone a punchbowl.

However, we did find a great viewpoint and what seemed like an ancient meadow containing wild flower areas graced with delicately waving lilac scabious and accompanying hedgerows (as mentioned) offering blackberries, rosehips and elderberries, to name but a few. The ground was very chalky, with many pieces of flint amongst the sometimes sparse grass. I may have picked up some chalk to give to our grandchildren – to teach them about geology, of course.

As it was approaching 15:00 by the time we'd finished our meandering walk, the chalet and a mug of tea were calling. The traffic in Sandown delayed us for a while and by the time we made it to Ventnor, the rain had returned with a vengeance. Instead of a planned Tesco trip, we were creative with the food we already had, before settling down once again with the spare duvet for some *Holby City* and *New Tricks* amid the puzzle books. Simple relaxation!

**Best bit:** *The mosaics of Brading Roman Villa*

**Worst bit:** *Wind at the windmill and rain in the evening*

### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September**

There had been a gloomy weather forecast for today and the low, grey sky proved the forecast right. Despite some remaining wind, though, the sea was calmer than the last couple of days. We were decidedly undecided about where to go and in the end it was a toss-up between West Cowes and Ryde. From the information we had, the former seemed the best option.

It was still dry when we set out and since our 40-minute or so journey took us through Newport, county town of the Isle of Wight, it was only natural to stop at M & S for a cappuccino. So far we have managed a cappuccino every day.

The drive to West Cowes was unremarkable, with some of the roads quite narrow, although not in the same league as Guernsey or parts of Cornwall. Some roads were hilly and bendy and many had potholes, but we had no problems arriving at West Cowes, promising tourist shops and views of the harbour. The views of the recycling bins and the backside of buildings at the car park where we settled weren't so great, but no matter, as we were going walkabout.

It began to rain as we walked to the car park exit, but we had rain jackets with hoods, so continued to the shopping area. However, I wasn't overly impressed, as it seemed like the sailing fraternity's version of a slightly run-down Looe in Cornwall and we couldn't find anything to interest us. We walked down to the harbour with absolutely nothing noteworthy to show for itself and looked out onto a recalcitrant grey sea, before returning to the shopping area. I know I have no interest in sailing and it was a grey day, but I couldn't see anything that said: "Hey! This is West Cowes, come and look at what we have to offer!"

We'd noticed a handy M & S store nearby, so went in the Food Hall to see what *they* had to offer. Sandwiches for lunch seemed the easiest option, so we took some back to eat in the car, facing the recycling bins and the backside of buildings. Remembering there was a Heritage Museum in Newport, we planned to visit there on our way back, but then saw it was only open on Tuesdays and Thursdays. It was turning out to be *that* sort of day! In the end, we went back to M & S to buy something interesting for tea, giving up any tourist visits as a bit of a washout. By the time we returned to the chalet, the rain was torrential.

The rest of the day was spent relaxing, drinking tea, reading, doing puzzles and enjoying sea-watch. We also watched two ladies of mature years moving into the chalet next to ours, having to trudge down from the car park the other side of the road, along a narrowish path to the chalet and back again several times with various cases and bags, all in the pouring rain. They must have become completely drenched. Thankfully, tomorrow's forecast is much better ☺

That's it for today, really. The weather broke for half an hour or so in the late afternoon and then closed in again. Yes, *that* sort of day!

**Best bit:** Cappuccino at M & S and sea-watch

**Worst bit:** West Cowes in the rain

### **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> September**

A correct weather forecast delivered what felt like a mini-miracle and we awoke to see the sun. The blue sky clouded over a little as we were drinking tea, but the sea was calm and the outlook favourable, so we set off for The Needles.

We left at 09:15 and drove for about 40 minutes (quite a bit of the way behind a coach) along a coastal road – or a road with a coastal view to the left and green fields to the right. It occurred to me that thanks to the challenging weather, we haven't been able to enjoy any of the Isle of Wight walks that look so inviting, but a week is too short for everything anyway.

We passed the road down to the famous Blackgang Chine along the way, although I suspect it's succumbed to detrimental commercialisation, sadly like so much else these days. This was rather evident when we arrived at the massive car park for The Needles Landmark Attraction, causing a miasma of doom to waft across my mind, remembering the desecration of Lands End in Cornwall. However, we were first heading out to the Old Battery on the headland and so could ignore the spectre of the retail complex for a while.

It was such a beautiful morning as we found our way to the private road that led for  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile to the Battery. We almost immediately found ourselves just ahead of a school party and I must admit I inwardly groaned. However, the teacher in charge was brilliant and simply by the way he spoke to the children, firmly but encouragingly, he commanded their respect. I would be happy for any child (OK, grandchild) of mine to have him as a teacher. Having said that, we tactically avoided being caught up in the school trip by manoeuvring onto a gravel path running along the grass on the road's sea edge. It was a safe enough gravel path, as I don't do danger if I can possibly help it.

On arrival at the Old Battery, now run by the National Trust, we were five minutes too early at 10:25 and had to wait, along with the school group. It was no hardship at all, though, standing there in the pleasantly warm morning air underneath a blue sky scattered with high, white clouds. We were soon through the entrance and heading out across the battery's parade ground to the viewing point of The Needles and despite being at the edge, so to speak, we were perfectly safe behind a tall, heavyish-duty wire fence. I appreciated that fence very much indeed and although it was a tall heavyish-duty wire fence, it most conveniently had large enough spacing for a camera lens to fit through:



**Hard chalk Needles (not hard cheese or salt)**

The Needles are the western tip of a band of chalk crossing the centre of the Isle of Wight. This ridge of hard chalk continues west under the sea to the Isle of Purbeck and is believed to have once been connected to Old Harry Rocks about 20 miles away. We don't speak much about Old Harry Rocks in my family any more, thanks to the reckless photographer I still live with, who traumatised me in 1987 while I sat helplessly with two young children. I'll never get over Old Harry Rocks. Well maybe I will, if I return one day for a perfectly safe visit. *NB: This return visit took place in 2022, but it did not feel in the slightest bit safe! It is described in 'Dorset 2022'.*

The Needles were so named because there was once a 36.6 metres/120 feet chalk stack in the place where the gap it left is still easily visible. This fourth rock was needle-shaped and known as Lot's Wife, who according to the Bible was turned into a pillar of salt (rather than chalk) for having the temerity to look back while fleeing the destruction of Sodom. There's not a lot can be said about that. Unfortunately, Lot's Wife collapsed in a storm in 1764 and there was no looking back – except that the name, thanks to the missing stack, stuck.

After taking our fill of photos, we returned to the battery's parade ground and decided to investigate the tunnel that had been dug in 1885 out towards the cliff face. Early experiments with searchlights had taken place there between 1889 and 1892. The present searchlight emplacement, built in 1899 and accessed by a spiral staircase, housed a searchlight, still in situ, that would spot enemy shipping trying to slip past under cover of darkness. It was a good tunnel, quite narrow as tunnels go, but sturdily built and offering a necessarily excellent view.

I should mention that the Old Battery was a Victorian fort built in 1862 and used throughout both World Wars. Within the parade ground was the Port War Signal Station built in 1940-41 by the Admiralty and manned/womanned throughout WWII by naval staff. After the war, the Navy remained until the battery was decommissioned in 1954, when it was passed to HM Coastguard. By the mid-1990s, the coastguard situation changed and the National Trust took over the building, utilising it as a staff room, office, exhibition room and tea room.

Tea room – this meant one thing, namely coffee! We found our way into the signal station building and up the stairs to the tea room, which was housed in the observation tower and decked out in 1940s style, complete with wartime music and serving staff wearing uptied headscarves (as I'm sure I remember my mother still used to wear for housework in the mid-1950s). We sat at the look-out window with its brilliant view and thoughtfully-provided binoculars, while I couldn't help pondering the incongruity of sitting in such surroundings and sipping a cappuccino. It was an unusual experience, but much appreciated and on reflection, I wish we'd also ordered some of their home-made cake.

In another room at the signal station was a display of wartime memorabilia, including stories from personnel who'd served at the Old Battery in WWII. I find first-hand accounts like these always humanise what would otherwise eventually become a sterile piece of history and the stories themselves were fascinating.

After some general wandering around the parade ground, during which time the strengthening sun forced us to remove our jackets, we ventured a little further. This rewarded us with some spectacular views on what had become a heaven-sent morning. It was such a complete change from the previous day:



**Sea, sky and chalk cliffs**

In due course, it was time to wend our way to the New Battery further up on the headland. This had been built in response to subsidence concerns at the Old Battery and was finished in 1895, ready to play its part in both World Wars. By the time we'd climbed hilly bits and numerous steps to the top, we were feeling hot, although the views en route had been worth it.

At the top, I was surprised to see a bus, although I wouldn't have caught it to the top and missed the views, despite having become hot with exertion. Besides, it felt cool in the underground rooms that had been used from 1955 to 1971 as a top-secret space rocket and missile development centre. This was quite a surprise, but of course the Cold War had been a very tricky time. Space rockets called *Black Knight* and *Black Arrow* had been developed with some success and in 1971, the only British satellite named *Prospero* was launched into orbit.

As fascinating as this was, it was lunchtime and we needed sustenance. Having read in the brochure of eating places at the Landmark Attraction, we reluctantly started our walk away from the wild and free headland and back towards the trappings of the retail park. It was a delightful walk with a great unfolding view of the famous cliffs of Alum Bay, which have given rise to the traditional souvenir trade of multicoloured sand ornaments. My parents had visited the Isle of Wight in their younger days before I was born and I can clearly remember a lighthouse ornament containing layers of different coloured sand.

The history of this unusual geological outcome began 70 million years ago when the sea bed rose, was eroded and sank beneath the sea once again. The new shallow sea laid down a series of clays and sands. Ten million years later, movement in the bedrock resulted in these sediments being pushed almost vertically to form the multicoloured cliffs of today.

In the past, visitors to Alum Bay itself were able to climb the foot of the cliffs and collect the sand themselves, which although detrimental to the cliff, must have been exciting. Nowadays this is of course not allowed and visitors must buy sand souvenirs from the sand shop in the retail park on the cliff top above.

The sand itself is made of quartz, feldspar and mica and in its pure form is white, with the other colours being produced by contamination with other minerals. It also includes extremely pure white silica that was once extracted for glass and pottery manufacture. Anyhow, geology aside, the cliffs even from a distance were admirable and I secretly began to harbour a hope that maybe I'd be able to buy some tasteful sand souvenirs for our grandchildren.



**The multicoloured cliffs of Alum Bay**

It was about 12:45 by the time we'd returned to the now very crowded car park and my feet were way too hot, so I took time to change my shoes for sandals, before heading into the messy throng of the so-called 'attraction' and wishing very much that we'd had the forethought to bring sandwiches. It was absolutely heaving with people in the second half of September, so I shudder to think what it must be like in high summer. The word 'hell' springs to mind.

After dicing for a while with the madding crowd, most of whom seemed to be wandering aimlessly, we came across a big self-service place selling hot and cold food. We decided we might as well investigate, but after we'd inadvertently joined the queue, we saw the few remaining sandwiches were mostly the meat and white bread variety. Alan deliberated about locating some hot food, but I had picked up a cheese scone in desperation and he followed suit. We managed to find a free table, but it felt truly horrible there, especially after the fresh air and inspiring scenery of the headland.

Outside again in the shopping and amusement area, it was frankly just as bad. We found the shop selling sand souvenirs, including where you could fill your own plastic containers, but it seemed tacky and way overpriced to me and was a great disappointment. The Isle of Wight food fare shop was no better and we left a general souvenir shop in dismay and disgust, having bought nothing. I felt as if I had become a snob, but it felt like a tourist cattle market.

Alan did go and have a look at another viewpoint of The Needles and nearby we located the Marconi Monument, which marked the actual site where Guglielmo Marconi's pioneering wireless transmission trials took place in 1897.

Unfortunately, there were so many tourists standing and sitting around it, that even that important piece of history, which was especially relevant to Alan in his profession, missed the mark by miles. All things considered, we felt as though we couldn't shake the dust of that place from our feet quickly enough. We had witnessed the rape of Alum Bay and found it more a Landmark Repulsion than a Landmark Attraction. I have had my say!

Since it wasn't yet 14:00 and since on our way to The Needles I'd happened to notice a signpost to a National Trust garden nearby, we were soon heading towards Mottistone Gardens, located in a sheltered south-facing valley. There were quite a few visitors there when we arrived, although the car park was anything but overcrowded. Even better, when we entered the gardens, the flowers there were still very much in bloom and looking quite beautiful.

The Mottistone estate itself stretches from chalk downs through rolling farmland lined with hedges to the sea. The Elizabethan manor house is tenanted and not open to the public, but there's still a great deal to see and enjoy in the gardens established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in the wider estate.

Below the manor house was a sunken walled garden, while steps above led to a hedged rose garden. If there's anything we both adore, it's a walled garden, sunken or otherwise. However, as soon as we entered the gardens, we seemed to instinctively find ourselves wandering amongst the flowers of the long, double-sided herbaceous border, in order to soothe our souls.

The flower therapy definitely worked and we walked on to loiter awhile in the small grassy orchard with its intriguing varieties of apples, before noticing a delightful, secluded little tea garden with tables dotted across the lawn. It was far too good to pass by and so we soothed our souls even further by sitting at a table for 20 minutes or so with a proper pot of tea for two and a slice of Victoria sponge to share. Alan said he felt "cleaner" there and I felt as if I could breathe again. It's amazing what benefit such simple, honest pleasures can bring 😊



**Soul soothing herbaceous border**

There were some walks around the Mottistone estate and one led to a prehistoric standing stone. The path led upwards through a wooded area, which was a little damp in places due to yesterday's rain, but not too bad. En route we met a dog owner who let her three dogs run towards us, one very frisky and jumpy and one barking and growling – if I had a dog phobia, I would have been petrified.

As it was, Alan uttered his standard phrase: "Can you keep your dogs under control, please?" She looked a little taken aback and made what seemed a half-hearted attempt to bring them to heel, but we still had a decidedly tricky time manoeuvring past them on a narrow, hilly part of the path. I wondered later if perhaps she was the tenant of the Elizabethan manor?

We fairly soon made it through the wooded area to the open grassland where the Long Stone was immediately visible. To be fair, there were actually two stones of the local sandstone (called greensand) that are the remains of a 6000-year-old Neolithic communal long barrow. The tallest stone stood at 13.9 metres/13 feet, while the smaller stone lay horizontally on the grass beside it.

The smaller stone wasn't in its original position, having been relocated by a treasure-seeking local landowner. Furthermore, a professional excavation in 1956 had revealed nothing of great importance. However, the site is revered on the Isle of Wight and pagan ceremonies are still celebrated throughout the year.

Meanwhile, the name of Mottistone seems to be allied to the site by a pleasing instance of name derivation. In Saxon times, 4000 years after the long barrow was built, the Long Stone is thought to have been used as a meeting place where important local matters were debated and justice decided. *Moteres stan* in Old English means *speaker's stone* and so it seems most probable that the name Mottistone has evolved over the centuries from that origin.



**The long stone named ... The Long Stone**

Whatever the case, it felt strangely pleasing to have come across at least one prehistoric site this holiday and so we wended our way back to the chalet and sea-watch, feeling undeniably tired but happy. It had been a really good day that had totally made up for the 'rain stopped play' situation the day before. Even *Who Do You Think You Are?* was on TV ☺

***Best bit:*** *The whole day apart from the worst bit*

***Worst bit:*** *The blight on the landscape that is The Needles Landmark Attraction*

### **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> September**

I didn't sleep nearly as well as I thought according to exhaustion levels and even had an aching 63-year-old hip. However, on waking at 07:20 to the non-dulcet tones of a nearby recycling van, I looked out of the window and saw that the sea was calm and the sky variable. That sentence was also rather variable.

It was our last chance to visit Osborne House, the summer home and rural retreat of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, so today's venue decision was easy. Therefore, not too long after a leisurely breakfast incorporating sea-watch, we were ready to drive more or less up through the middle of the island from south to north, where Osborne House resides very regally in East Cowes.

We arrived just before opening time at 10:00 and there was already a queue, including a coachload. It felt cool standing around in sandalled feet and speaking of temperature, the daily average has been around the 15°-19° Centigrade mark, although hotter when the sun's been out and cooler after sundown.

About ten minutes later, we'd paid the admission fee and were free to begin our walk around the grounds. I say that lightly, as they were quite extensive, so it was just as well we had a basic map. We were en route towards Swiss Cottage, where there was a place to buy coffee, when we looked back and saw a rather good view of Osborne House with no people milling around outside in the gardens. This was too good a photo opportunity to miss, so we hurried across some long, wet grass to a decent spot with an unimpeded view.



**Osborne House - no people!**

After this, we continued to Swiss Cottage, built by Prince Albert for his and Queen Victoria's four sons and five daughters. This was a place where they could not only play, but learn how to bake, cook and serve tea (the princesses), act out battles in a miniature fort in the garden (the princes), build things and grow produce in their own garden plots. Inside it was amusing to see different rooms with personal touches and imagine the children enjoying some freedom.

Swiss Cottage Museum had been built in 1862 next to Swiss Cottage, when the growing collection of natural history items collected by the princes and princesses required more room. As the children matured into adulthood, their collections continued to grow and were even added to in time by their own children. Walking around looking at the various display cabinets, the many strange and wonderful artefacts from all over the world were quite astounding, but there was rather a dead feel to the place, which didn't induce us to linger.



**Cappuccino time**

Nearby was the Gazelle House, a shed in which the children had once kept three gazelles, but was now proudly called The Gazelle House Cake Shop. This meant coffee, so we wandered inside and availed ourselves of a timely hot cappuccino, which we drank sitting outside on a wooden bench by the museum. The sun was stronger by then, so it was an enjoyably caffeinated warming interlude.

We were fairly close to the private beach of Osborne House, which included the intriguing spectacle of Queen Victoria's personal bathing machine, complete with changing room and plumbed-in toilet. It was a very pleasant walk there through a wooded area, where red squirrels could allegedly be seen.

I have wanted to see a red squirrel for a number of years, but I somehow didn't expect to see one and was sadly proved right in my expectation. However, it's still satisfying to know that red squirrels thrive there, simply because grey squirrels were never introduced to the Isle of Wight – which is an island.

We soon arrived at the stretch of seafront with its dark golden-coloured, quite gritty sand overlooking the Solent, where it was sunny enough for some people to be sitting in hired deck chairs, enjoying a drink or an ice cream at the café there. I was more interested in the bathing machine, though, which sat in state a little way back from the beach, looking admirable but sadly not open for closer scrutiny. I loitered for a while to take a tourist-free photo:



**Anyone for a dip?**

Also at the beach was the Queen's Alcove, which was basically a sturdy little shelter that was richly decorated with blue and pink tiles on the inside, where Victoria liked to sit and sketch or write letters. I must confess that if sat there to write (not sketch, forget the sketching), I would be forever looking out at the peaceful view in front of me. It was a beautiful, quiet spot, set back from the sand underneath some trees, perfect for a spot of contemplation. On reflection, Queen Victoria must have had a whole lot of contemplation to do.

By the time we strolled back up from the beach to the house, it was gone midday and time to find somewhere to eat. We walked up to the nearby Terrace Restaurant – before quickly walking away again after seeing that the first item on the menu was Duck Something at £12.95. We admired some nearby flower beds and then made our way to the Petty Officers' Quarters Café, which amused me because it was obviously much more on our level. The cheese, chutney and salad sandwiches washed down with rose lemonade were just fine...

Not too far away was a walled fruit and flower garden and here we spent a happy 20 minutes, wandering around with hardly anybody else there, admiring the dahlias, cosmos and all the other planting. It was sunny and hot by then, so much so that we felt the need to seek shade.



**Dahlia delight**

Luckily there was an area of dappled shade beneath some trees as we made our way to the house, where we knew it would be cooler inside. We discovered no photography was allowed, which meant that we took our time, looking for once without a photographic focus at the items that interested us in various rooms. I've never actually liked 'Victoriana' and I must admit that so much seemed way too ornate and way too cluttered. Victoria's dressing table mirror was quite possibly the most hideous object I've ever clapped eyes on.

However, a significant amount was remarkable and Alan clearly admired the beautiful ceiling decorations a great deal. I know this, because he kept saying so, while gazing steadfastly upwards. He also marvelled at the Durbar Dining Room, designed in lavish Indian style to reflect both Victoria's status as Empress of India and also her fascination with India itself.

I found myself much more interested in Victoria's bedroom, where she had died at the age of 81 on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1901, as well as the dining room, where her body had lain for several days before her funeral. I'm not especially into the macabre, it just felt like 'real history' on a par with seeing King Charles I's actual handwriting. Instead of merely names and references, I find tangible evidence that these people once lived (and died) is heady stuff.

We were both interested in the nursery rooms, thinking that those nine children were very fortunate in some ways, but definitely not in others. As for us, we'd been very fortunate with the earlier sunshine, but as I looked out of a window (in which room I can't recall), I saw the heavens had opened and the gravel pathways outside were becoming quite flooded in places. There were a couple of rumbles of thunder, but the force of it was mainly in the volume of rain.

After Queen Victoria's death, the house was given to the state and from 1903 to 1921, was used by the Royal Navy as a junior officer training college. During World War I, part of the house was used as a convalescent home for officers, with two of its more famous residents being Robert Graves (*Goodbye To All That*) and A A Milne (*Winnie the Pooh*). Photos and detailed descriptions of some of the treatments carried out were disturbing to say the least.

The rain took a while to ease and by the time we left, a motley collection of people had gathered to wait indoors before venturing outside. There was still some light rain when Alan and I decided to make a break for it, stepping and jumping carefully over huge puddles lying on the ground in many places. One exit path in the car park was completely waterlogged.

The final drive back to Ventnor was uneventful and the sun even made an appearance again before tea, as we reluctantly started the process of packing our bags. I watched the Brittany Ferries vessel heading out from Southampton one last time with a sense of anticipated nostalgia, if there is such a thing. Our last evening was as quiet and relaxed as all the other evenings had been ☺

**Best bit:** *The sense of 'real' history at Osborne House*

**Worst bit:** *Having to pack*

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> September**

I slept better than the previous night, although I woke in the early hours to see there was a clear sky with the stars looking so bright and very beautiful. For the umpteenth time, I wished we had binoculars. By 06:45 it was still beautiful (and I still wished we had binoculars), as the sunrise cast a red glow over the calm sea, with a few white clouds out on the horizon. It was a lovely sight to watch while drinking tea, I'd be very happy to have more mornings like that.

However, we had to vacate the chalet by 09:00 and so it was action stations. We'd cleared up a lot the previous evening, so it wasn't an onerous task and the time came only too soon for a last, lingering look at the beautiful sea view. Spookily, as we drove from Ventnor to East Cowes on a coastal road, a heavy mist appeared so suddenly that it felt as if we'd driven into an alternative reality.

It made perfect sense to call by at Newport's M & S for a final cappuccino and to purchase some sandwiches before driving onward to East Cowes – while noticing that the mist had gone as mysteriously as it had appeared. Maybe it's an Isle of Wight phenomenon. We arrived too early for our assigned ferry and had to spend a while waiting in a nearby Waitrose car park, but there are worse things.

We finally made it onto the *Red Falcon* ferry and enjoyed a smooth crossing, looking out at all the Solent activity. Our luck ran out once we were back at Southampton, though, as it was heaving with Boat Show traffic and pedestrians.

Once through the mêlée, a long, tedious journey followed with quite a few hold-ups at the beginning. After a couple of hours, Alan began to tire, but there seemed to be a dearth of stopping places and by the time we eventually made it to Exeter Services, he was exhausted. However, while it altogether hadn't been a pleasant journey, at least it had been a safe one.

We both enjoyed our week on the Isle of Wight, despite being aware that there were many walking opportunities we didn't have the time or the weather to investigate, so a future visit in late spring seems to be a good idea to remedy that. As at so many holiday destinations nowadays, there seems to be far too much commercialisation and pandering to the masses in order to get their money (in order to make a living) and all I can say to this is thank heavens for English Heritage and the National Trust! And for wonderful sea views!

