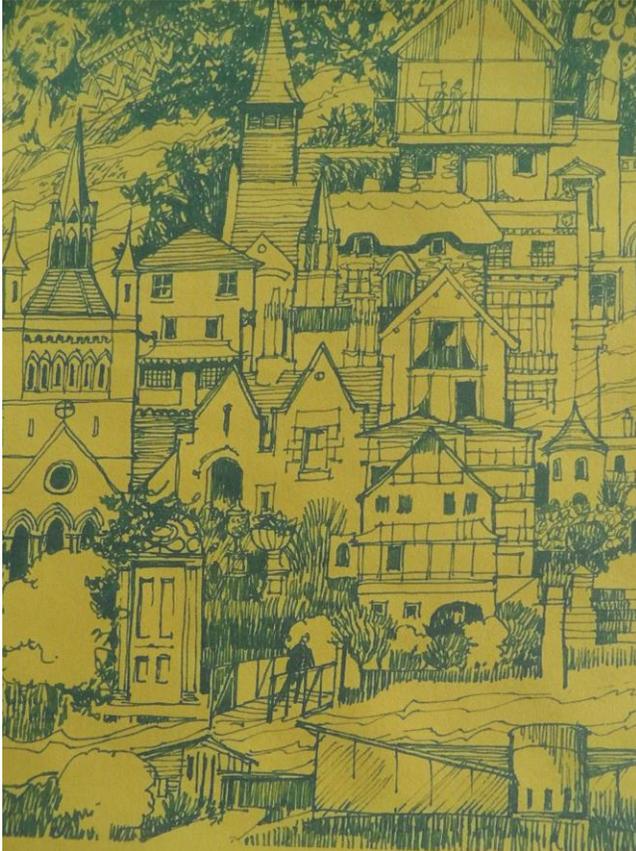




Isle of Wight Society Newsletter

November 2018

Issue 124



Island Buildings Restored The Isle of Wight Society Celebration of Conservation at Quay Arts Centre Newport 27th October - 17th November

This exhibition looks at the past 45 years of our Conservation Award winners, showing a multitude of excellent work achieved by Island owners, architects, builders and skilled crafts men.

We hope that many IWS members and the public will be able to see the exhibition.

Illustration by Newman Smith

Norris Castle, East Cowes is on the Historic England "At Risk" register.

Norris Castle features heavily in this newsletter as there are many issues surrounding it and any future planning applications for new uses.

The Isle of Wight Society and many other organisations are carefully studying the Georgian buildings and the whole Estate, now listed Grade 1. The farm buildings are combined with a walled garden, a system described as unique in England.



Setting the scene for the building of Norris Castle.

This article was given to us by Matilda Harden of the Georgian Group, and is a copy of a talk she gave in October 2018 at a workshop to understand Norris Castle, East Cowes.

In discussing England in the late eighteenth century we need to consider why the population differed from the preceding centuries. Around the middle of the century, after two decades of stagnation, the population began to grow, meaning that from c.1771 to 1811 the annual average population growth was over 1%. This has been regarded as 'optimal' for economic progress to expand trade and provide employment, both of which are directly responsible for the 'consumer revolution' that saw the consumption habits of the aristocracy spread to the expanding middle classes. Indeed, the material possessions of the large proportionate size of the middle-income groups came to distinguish English society from its European counterparts. Britain's rise to world power over the course of the C18 was essentially facilitated by its ability to tax commodities bought by the middle and upper classes, both directly and indirectly. So, by the end of the century you see a wealthy and large middle class, aping the style, habits and customs of the aristocracy.

The emergence of the Picturesque aesthetic shows a fundamental shift in attitudes to beauty and form. In 1768 William Gilpin, one of the first writers on the subject, defined 'picturesque' as 'a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture'. The images that would be most associated in the British psyche with this would be the paintings of Claude Lorraine and Poussin. Gilpin himself wrote extensively on the subject and illustrated his points throughout. It sums up the ideal. Mountainous, rural, dramatic

cliffs and an historic ruin all tick the right boxes. The craggy, morose, wild landscapes of Britain fitted perfectly into the aesthetic ideal of the Picturesque, and soon everyone who considered themselves to be at all cultured would be experts on the matter.



Gilpin wrote prolifically on the merits of touring Britain, and a distinct patriotism developed as the idea gained momentum. Genteel travel was not new by the latter half of the eighteenth century. Visiting country houses had long been on the itinerary of tourists and the purpose of travel had moved on from travelling for mere knowledge. The French Revolutionary Wars which started in 1792 and would see Britain at war with France until 1815, granted with a pause here and there, were a huge boon to the British tourism industry. The Grand Tour by this point had become a very different creature to that which we usually imagine. No longer the realm of wealthy aristocratic sons travelling through France and Italy gaining a knowledge and education in languages and the classics, by the end of the C18 it involved people of all ages: men, women, children, and families. The war made it illegal to travel to France and almost impossible to travel elsewhere on the continent.

The patriotism that ensued resulted in a passion for touring Britain. Seaside towns of the south coast and on the Isle of Wight rapidly expanded.

The south coast had already had its fashionable profile raised by George III frequenting Weymouth for his health and The Prince of Wales removing himself to Brighton for his gout and to escape investigation into his financial excesses. One might expect the war and threat of invasion to deter visitors. The enemy was sitting directly across the channel, and military barracks were springing up everywhere. Rather than put people off, the resorts closest to the enemy grew the fastest. The presence of naval and army officers and their families stimulated social life and helped to develop the already improving road network across the country.

The Isle of Wight was no exception. Socialising within your own class, seeing and being seen by them and asserting your status by where you went, what you wore and what you owned were increasingly important. Sarah Spencer, daughter of Earl Spencer, 1ST Lord of the Admiralty, wrote that she and her family might go to 'some sea place. Every place on the British coast has an equal chance of our presence'. She liked Brighton the least, 'a Londonish town full of fine folk, barouches, princes, theatres and public lounging rooms'. Ryde was, 'full of all the fashionable....male and female showing off their best dresses and enjoying the beauty of the evening'.

The building of seaside towns began in earnest. By the 1770s, with 'the increasing resort of genteel people to this place, for pleasure as well as bathing' a whole new town sprang up at Margate. Fashionable rows of houses and villas in the Picturesque taste, often taking their cue from vernacular cottages, became particularly common in quieter, more genteel resorts.

C18 travel was only possible because of improvements in infrastructure. 'Turnpike Mania' took hold from about 1750 and access to the coast improved dramatically. By 1770 there were 15,000 miles of turnpiked road in England and Wales.

Travelling times fell rapidly. To give some idea of the improvements, the average speed of coach travel in 1750 was 4.7mph. By the 1800 this had doubled to 9.4mph. In addition, the stage and mail coach networks had expanded to such a peak of efficiency and coverage that by the early 1800s virtually the entire country was accessible.

Travel was stimulated by travel books and guide books. By the 1770s there were hundreds of guide books for all parts of the country. Thomas West's 'Guide to the Lakes' (1778) was reissued 7 times before 1800, showing routes to take, places to stop and see the best picturesque views. By the end of the century it was possible to buy 'The British Tourists' (1798-1800) by William Mavor, which compressed guide books on the whole country into 6 volumes. Tourism, a term actually coined in the 1780s, also saw the birth of souvenirs. Large country seats produced guide books of their own and expected a steady turnover of visitors.



Norris Castle, built 1798 - 1808

While the ability to travel and pay visits was concentrated among people in polite society, almost anyone sporting respectable clothes and able to tip the Housekeeper or Head Gardener was afforded access to the great showcase houses and gardens of the day. Lord Henry Seymour at Norris often was mistaken for a gardener as he enjoyed

toiling with his men, and when tipped would pass on the largesse to his workers.

Stowe was so popular with visitors that it had its own inn to cater for them. In turn, the picturesque houses would feature in guidebooks of the area. On the Island, George Brannon almost cornered the market and was a prolific engraver. Guidebooks also focused on seaside resorts, and endeavoured to make them appear as select as possible. References to 'respectability' are repeated over and over again. For example, Cowes 'was much frequented by persons of quality during the summer' and Dover 'The influx of a number of most respectable families, as summer-visitors, has occasioned the erection of a new assembly-room and theatre'.

And so, to conclude, with improving travel conditions and the taste for travel and sightseeing assisted by the plethora of guidebooks for the increasingly prosperous middle class, the late C18 'English Grand Tour' was born. Reading guides and travel journals, which were followed up by personal observations, inspired the man-made creation of the Picturesque landscapes with ruins, cascades and other touches to inspire the imagination.

Alongside this, seaside resorts boomed and seaside property became highly sought after.



Norris fits perfectly into this narrative. It has a landscape designed by the most famous landscape designers in the country, and a Gothic Revival design overlooking the Solent by one of the leading architects of the day. With Portsmouth as a naval hub, access to the Isle of Wight was greatly improved, and Norris's position ensured it would be seen by the busy shipping and yachting traffic of the Eastern Solent.

An account written in 1845 described Norris as follows:

'Witnessed from the sea, it has a most imposing view and even romantic appearance, and many would suppose, from its venerable aspect, that it had endured the 'wear and tear' of many centuries.'

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Society Information

Chairman: Mrs Sarah Burdett BEM

Treasurer: Mr D Burdett 92 Greenlands Road, East Cowes, PO32 6HT Email burdett.sd@gmail.com

Executive Committee: the above officers with Colin Arnold (Ryde), Diana Conyers (Ryde) Helena Hewston (Newbridge) and Wilf Curtis (East Cowes).

The contact address for the Society is the East Cowes Heritage Centre. Website: www.isleofwightsociety.org.uk

Isle of Wight Society Subscriptions

Due 1st January - The Rates are:

Full membership £12, Joint Full £20
Senior membership £10, joint Senior £18
Corporate membership £20

Subs should be paid direct to The Treasurer, Isle of Wight Society, East Cowes Heritage Centre, 8 Clarence Road, East Cowes, PO32 6EP

or by Bank Transfer to the Society Account

Name Isle of Wight Society **Bank** Lloyds
Bank Code: 30-95-99 **Acct Code:** 00331217

**The Norris Castle Estate is a national treasure.
What will be its future ?**



Where is Norris Castle ? It is in East Cowes. If you walk up the quiet, narrow, Millfield Avenue, at the end of the gravel section you come to a large closed gate to a very private estate. On the left is a grey stone building with a tall tower. This is the original gate house to the estate. Beyond it the gravel road bends away through trees until it reaches a large stone mansion, Norris Castle. To the left, looking down the hill between the trees you see the waters of the Solent and the Hampshire coastline beyond.

A second approach is along the narrow, quiet, New Barn Road. Again, at the end, you come across large metal closed gates with a lodge on the left. The gravel road beyond winds through fields until it reaches a large stone building. This is the farm complex complete with a large walled garden. The road continues past the fort-like farmhouse, curves around a copse of trees and arrives at the other end of Norris Castle. In this case the term castle means a large residence decorated externally with architectural fortifications. The eastern end of the castle was the family accommodation. Part of this is a large, round section of the building, with three floors above ground level surmounted by a tower. To the right there is another view of the Solent.

**Historic England have listed the Castle, the farm complex and the grounds as being of the greatest importance historically.
This makes the whole estate nationally valuable.**

What makes it so unusual ? The estate was developed by the parliamentarian Lord Henry Seymour as his country retreat between 1798 and 1808. The farming industry had developed rapidly during the 1700s. The country was engaged in the Napoleonic Wars and needed food for the army. Lord Henry Seymour designed the estate with recreational parkland around the castle but the rest he used as a model farm for raising cattle and growing cereals. Lord Seymour employed the nationally renowned James Wyatt to design the buildings for him. Wyatt used the topography of the land to create the maximum visual impact of the castle when seen from the Solent.

While a number of people have owned the Norris estate, very little has changed since the early 1800s. All the owners maintained the farm in some way while enjoying the castle and its position. This is an accolade to the skill of James Wyatt. Lord Seymour used seaweed as well as farm manure to improve the soil of the estate. Prior to World War Two the walled garden had examples of every fruit that was grown in Europe. The farm building is only one of two in the whole country to receive the highest listing from Historic England and is different in that the farm and walled garden are combined in one structure.



The farm and garden complex

Why are Historic England and the local community concerned about the future of the estate?

It is a large estate with two large buildings to maintain. This requires money. During the latter

part of the 1900s not enough investment was made to maintain the buildings properly.

In 2011 Historic England put the castle on its “At Risk” register. In 2014 the owners put the estate on the market. Over twenty bids were submitted. The successful bidder was a developer who is proposing to convert the castle into a bijou hotel.

The Isle of Wight Society has been presenting Conservation Awards for the past forty five years and is well aware of the problem of **how to use old buildings in a manner that will ensure their future.** In general we support the idea of owner occupation but this requires sufficient family income. Converting to a museum or other cultural centre is usually financially not viable. Another alternative is some commercial use where there is sufficient profit to maintain the structure. The idea of converting the Norris estate into a public amenity run commercially is attractive, especially as the estate has been out of public view except from the Solent where it provides a major landmark.

However there are two major difficulties.

One is that, like many public figures, including Queen Victoria who stayed at Norris as a young girl, they seek a quiet place to escape to and enjoy some peace. **The road access to the Norris Estate is not conducive to the easy flow of traffic,** especially that required for construction work.

Secondly the geology of the East Cowes peninsular is that of a gravel plateau overlaying clay. Some of the clay is Blue Slipper and liable to slippage as can be seen by the blockage of East Cowes Esplanade near Castle Point, adjacent to the Norris Estate.

There are signs that there is some slippage near the castle that requires the land to be drained to correct this. This engineering work will be expensive. All this is in addition to correcting the deterioration of the castle building.

To develop the estate to support a hotel will be expensive. For a normal hotel to be viable the minimum figure of sixty bedrooms is sometimes used as a guideline. There is concern that the accommodation cannot be divided up sympathetically to provide this.

The developer is proposing that permission be given for sufficient **“enabling development”** (housing) to be built on the Norris estate to provide the capital required. Many people who are considering the future of the estate feel that the building of houses on the estate will destroy the balance of a large residence supported by a farm. It will be additional housing in a community that over the last fifteen years has seen its population grow by about two thousand without any improvement in its infrastructure. East Cowes has only one road from the south serving a peninsula with one of the two major ports at its northern extremity. Then there is the problem of access to the Norris Estate. The developer is proposing a new road through the adjoining Spring Hill estate, from the Esplanade.

This is a complex issue. Do nothing and the castle will eventually collapse. Do we ignore the historic value of the Norris estate on this Island which has so much history and relies so much on the tourism industry? Do we allow development that may not be completed, leaving a situation where nobody is satisfied with the result? When a planning application is submitted it will be up to the case officer to make a recommendation to the councillors on the planning committee with enough conditions attached to ensure that the Island's wishes are met. However, even the Island Council admits that under the present, almost impossibly difficult financial situation, their lack of powers of enforcement and fear of financial loss, if taken to appeal on refusal, may not leave them in a position to support our local heritage.

On the 18th of October, 2018, Historic England invited those organisations interested in the Norris Estate and its future to a workshop to discuss the matter. Among those invited were: - The Isle of Wight Council, the national Gardens Trust, the Isle of Wight Gardens Trust, the national Georgian Group, the Isle of Wight Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), East Cowes Town Council and the Isle of Wight Society. During the morning six excellent presentations were made giving the background to the present circumstances. In the afternoon the planning process was presented,

highlighting the different levels of protection for historic buildings and the balance of benefit and harm a development might produce. The organisations then divided into groups and discussed various questions and produced comments.

It was agreed by everyone that **not enough of the public know the true nature of the Norris Estate** and that it is essential to educate both the public and the councillors and officers of the Island Council in this matter. It was a lively and interesting day.

At the end of the meeting the county councillor for heritage, who made the opening comments at the meeting saying that the discussion could provide guidance for the planners, **agreed that the Norris Estate is a national treasure.**

We await the Norris planning application.

A report from David Burdett, Vice Chairman IWS

A Personal Point of View.

From Helena Hewston IOW Society member and a Parish Councillor.

Over the few years that I have been involved in civic affairs I have had to learn to make connections. I am not referring to net-working, meeting people, but listening and putting ideas together.

One topic that features greatly is Housing. A lay person does not have a booklet entitled "How to do Housing Guide" or "XYZ Steps to Planning Decisions" as their bed time reading. An effort is required to be open minded.

The easy stance taken to rubbish the workings of a Planning Department curtails any search for understanding. For example we hear, "It's no use putting in comments as we are never listened to." "That developer is only in it for the money." "All social housing brings a rise in crime."

These may have an element of truth but it's not the whole picture.

Further criticism of Island Planning is that it does not have an overall policy. I disagree. An overall policy is too narrow for this Island, such as all development must be in red brick and show and reflect Victorian architecture; no vehicular speed is to exceed 40 mph or 20mph in a built up area. We know these would be impossible to sustain, at this point in time, but never say never. There are many policies in the Island Plan scrutinised and giving structure and guidance. If we did not have them then there would be chaos.

It is often said that there have been missed opportunities. For example the keeping of the railway network in the 1960s, and the fixed link tunnel in the early 1900s, but that can be said with hindsight. The Island may not have retained what we value today.

When compared with the mainland there is strong evidence of the maintenance of Island character.

We have Conservation Areas, listed buildings, barn and outhouse conversions, one way systems, footpaths, bi-ways and bridleway routes along historical access; we do not have skyscrapers and tower blocks, only one dual carriageway eating up the land and no nuclear power station. We do not live in the past: we are here now and we make our environment with our wants and needs. The planning system enables that to happen.

There was a time when our Planning Departments did not exist. Building regulations eventually became formalised. Academic qualifications for a person to be part of the team are now essential, as a starting point in the profession. The lay person needs to listen and with an element of trust engage in dialogue with planners. All need an open mind.

So the next time a glib aside comes to mind think what proof there is.

What is the extra that can be added to take the conversation and discussion forward ?

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Planning News

The Isle of Wight Council is currently engaged in two different but related planning exercises: the preparation of a **Regeneration Strategy** and the revision of the **Island Plan**.

The idea of a **Regeneration Strategy** was initiated by the previous Council administration. The original aim was to generate income for the Council in order to compensate for the loss of government funding. However, the exercise has evolved to become, in effect, the production of a general economic development strategy.

According to the draft document, which was published in July, the Regeneration Strategy sets out what the Council will do 'to ensure the economic future of the Island' and to make it 'a great place to grow up, live, work and visit'. The aim is to generate economic development which will not only provide revenue for the Council – thus enabling it to continue to fund local public services, but also increase employment and improve local infrastructure and services.

The Strategy covers the period from 2018 to 2030. The draft document is divided into eight main sections: physical regeneration; housing; infrastructure; utilising public assets as 'pump primers'; skills and business development; area regeneration; communications, engagement and partnership working; and monitoring, evaluation and resourcing.

The Council's Regeneration Team consulted widely, with organisations and the general public, during the preparation of the Strategy, and in at least some cases, public opinion had a significant effect. For example, in Ryde there was widespread objection to initial plans proposed for the seafront and these were subsequently withdrawn. The Council invited views on the draft document.

The **Island Plan** is a more familiar document. It is the 'core strategy' that the Council is required to produce under the Town and Country Planning Act. It provides the policy framework within which

'physical planning' decisions are made; in other words, the policies that guide the Council's response to planning applications by developers and the general public. The Council is required to revise this strategy regularly.

The revised document will take account of changes in the local environment since the publication of the original version in 2012 and any new information that has become available. Included in the latter is a new Housing Need Assessment recently undertaken by the Council. This assessment, which is a statutory requirement and has to adopt a standard methodology, determines the number of additional homes that the Island needs – which is, in effect, a target for housing delivery. The findings, which were published in April this year, are likely to generate controversy because they indicate that the need has increased from 520 to 641 units each year.

The new document will also take account of the Regeneration Strategy. The intention is that 'physical planning' should be an instrument for implementing the broader economic development strategy that the latter provides. This rationale is reflected in recent changes in the Council's administrative structure, which include the incorporation of planning into the responsibilities of the Director of Regeneration.

A draft of the new Island Plan document is scheduled to be published in October. There will then be a three-month consultation period. For further details, visit

<https://www.iow.gov.uk/Residents/Environment-Planning-and-Waste/Planning-Policy-new/The-Island-Plan-Review/Background-Information1>.

Diana Conyers Autumn 2018

We hope every member will look at the draft plans, digest them, and make their own comments! SB

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The Isle of Wight Society was formed in 1969 to stimulate interest in the beauty, history and character of the Island, and to encourage high standards of planning, building development and Conservation. Registered Charity, No. 276986. Affiliated to the national Civic Voice organisation.