

Prince Albert - Isle of Wight connections

It was not until the 19th century that the Isle of Wight became a holiday resort, an 'England in Miniature' which attracted great painters and writers in search of unspoilt scenery and a sense of freedom. Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, John Keats, Turner and Ruskin are just a few of the literary and artistic 'greats' who were inspired by this enchanted isle.

The Island developed rapidly during the Victorian era seeing a vast influx of tourists and holiday villas, the grandest being Osborne House, the countryside retreat of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. This Royal stamp of approval brought many Victorians to visit and settle on the Island. These days, around 2.5 million visitors per year are attracted to the Isle of Wight by the beautiful natural and built environment and the many cultural, social and leisure attractions.

Osborne House

Osborne House was designed by Prince Albert and built by Thomas Cubitt in 1845-48 as a retreat and family residence for Queen Victoria. The building, with its large towers and balconies reflected Prince Albert's interest in the Italian architecture of the period. The Swiss Cottage, a playhouse for the royal children, was built by estate carpenters in the style of a Swiss chalet in 1854. There, the children were encouraged to garden. Each child was given a rectangular plot in which to grow fruit, vegetables and flowers. They would sell their products to their father, who was keen to teach them the basics of economics. Tel. 01983 200022, www.english-heritage.org.uk/osborne

Barton Manor

Barton Manor lies adjacent to Osborne House and formed part of the Osborne Estate. Prince Albert laid out the original garden. Now privately owned, the gardens are open to the public four days every year in support of the Island's Earl Mountbatten Hospice.

Albert Cottage

Albert Cottage was bought in 1852 by Prince Albert to be part of a Botanic Garden development of the Osborne House Estate, and was used together with the adjacent Osborne Cottage by Royal guests. In 1889 a covered corridor was constructed to link the two properties and allow easy access without having to brave the weather.

When Queen Victoria died in 1901, Edward VII kept both cottages for the use of her youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice. After later neglect, it was turned into a hotel in 1999 and is now further developed by current owners, HTP Training. Tel. 01983 299309, www.albertcottagehotel.com

St Mildred's Church

St Mildred's Church on the Isle of Wight is an outstanding example of Royal patronage. On a visit here, it quickly becomes apparent what personal attention and loving care it has received from Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, from its very design and building to the many beautiful features and memorials within it. In the Church Centre, there is a bright and spacious coffee shop, usually open from 10am

to 4pm, Monday to Thursday, 1st April to the end of October. Tel. 01983 200276, <http://iow.uk.com/whippingham-church>

Ventnor Botanic Gardens

Ventnor Botanic Garden is located on the site of the former Royal National Hospital of Diseases of the Chest. The garden lies in the remarkable microclimate at the heart of the famous undercliff and is protected from the cold northerly winds by chalk downs. The site has strongly themed gardens with plants from South America, The Mediterranean, New Zealand, Australia and Japan.

Appreciation of the garden's history is paid with traditional areas of specimen trees in lawn, the development of the Palm garden, and a garden that overall still has the Victorian path system.

The Palm Garden is one of the few areas of the garden surviving from the days of the hospital. This area was formerly known as the Palm Court due to the presence of the specimens of the "Chusan Palm" *Trachycarpus fortunei*. These are the oldest palms in the British Isles, collected for Veitches Nursery and presented to Queen Victoria who deigned that they be planted there when she was patron of the hospital in 1888. Although this area was badly damaged in the 1987 storm, all the palms survived. Tel. 01983 855397, www.botanic.co.uk

The West Wight

After the death of Prince Albert in 1861, one of the few who brought comfort to Queen Victoria was her Poet Laureate, Alfred Tennyson. She was soothed and pleased by his melodious requiem for a much-loved friend who had drowned, and was sure that 'Only those who have suffered as I do, can understand these beautiful poems'.

Tennyson lived at Farringford on the western tip of the Isle of Wight and was the closest thing the Victorians came to a 'celebrity'. The spectacular coastal scenery inspired some of Tennyson's best poetry including 'Maud', 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and 'Crossing the Bar'. www.farringford.co.uk

During his time at Farringford, Tennyson had a friendship with the celebrated photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron who lived nearby at Dimbola Lodge, now a photographic museum dedicated to her work. Tel.01983 756814, www.dimbola.co.uk.

The National Trust now owns much of the coastal countryside, known as Tennyson Down. The 12-mile Tennyson Trail passes Farringford as well as the Tennyson Monument. With spectacular views over the Solent and mainland, the trail attracts thousands of walkers each year.

Royal Yacht Squadron

The Royal Yacht Squadron, located on the coast at Cowes Castle on the Isle of Wight, is the most prestigious yacht club in the UK and arguably the world.

The yacht *America*, the brainchild of Prince Albert, was built for a syndicate of American yachtsmen and visited these shores in response to The Great Exhibition of 1851. The Queen and Prince Albert took great interest in the yacht's progress once she arrived, followed the race part way themselves and visited the yacht the following

day. The race around the Isle of Wight was won by *America* and the trophy was renamed the America's Cup after the boat was donated to the New York Yacht Club. Tel. 01983 292191, www.rys.org.uk

Ryde

One of the most prominent remnants of the Victorian era on the Isle of Wight is the flamboyant Prince Consort Building, which Prince Albert had built for Victoria in the 1840s.

Previously known as the Royal Victoria Yacht Club, the building overlooks the Solent from the western end of the esplanade at Ryde, and was intended as a private place for Victoria, because the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes would not allow female visitors, even royal ones.

In keeping with Prince Albert's interest in architecture, the Royal Victoria Yacht Club has real architectural merit. Built in the Italianate style, its sweeping colonnade of 10 Tuscan columns supports a balcony with decorative cast-iron railings. The succession of arched, round-headed windows gives it a colonial air, while on the roof is the Royal Coat of Arms with rampant lion and unicorn of both Albert and Victoria's crests (one of only two joint crests that survive). Once the Prince Consort Hotel, the building has now been split into private apartments. The Prince Consort building, St Thomas' Street, Ryde, Isle of Wight (bottom of Union Street, the main street which runs through Ryde town centre). See also the Victoria Arcade in Union Street.

More information: www.historicrydesociety.com, tel. 01983 566054