

CARISBROOKE CASTLE

Newport, Isle of Wight PO30 1XY

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Carisbrooke Castle looked really interesting in all the tourist information, so it was a must during our stay on the Isle of Wight. All morning there'd been showers of fine rain and an almost constant wind, although there were plenty of sunny intervals too, so we decided it was good enough to pay a visit.

First impressions as we approached this motte and bailey castle were of a well-preserved fortification. I already knew it was significant as the castle where King Charles I had been imprisoned during the Civil War in the mid-17th century, shortly before his execution, so I was looking forward to some hands-on history.



A castle fit for a king's imprisonment (photo by Alan Santillo)

As we passed through the gatehouse to the courtyard and into the guardhouse, where a short film was showing, the wind seemed to spring up with truculent intent. It was very 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.

The short film was simple but informative, so I came away knowing a lot more of the castle's history. Although never proved, a ruined wall suggested that occupation was possible in late Roman times, while its earliest certain use was as a 6th-century pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery (three graves having been found during excavations). The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions that Wihtgar, the cousin of King Cynric of Wessex, died in 544 AD and was buried there.

By the late 7th century, the fort is thought to have been taken over by the Jutes and during the 8th century, an Anglo-Saxon stronghold occupied the site. By 1000 AD, the prominent hilltop dominating the centre of the island became the site of a fortified settlement (an Anglo-Saxon *burh*) consisting of a rectangular enclosure protected by a chalk bank, which was later faced with a stone wall. There was a single gateway and large timber buildings within the settlement.

This development had been necessary as a defence against the Vikings. These sea-borne raiders had regularly attacked the Isle of Wight during the late 10th to early 11th centuries and had even occupied it between 998 and 1009, using it as a base from where they raided the mainland. The Anglo-Saxons needed to have defended settlements that also acted as a place of refuge for the populace – and on the Isle of Wight, Carisbrooke was an obvious choice.

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the Isle of Wight was granted to William FitzOsbern (c.1020-1071), a relative and close counsellor of William the Conqueror (c.1028-1087). He built a castle within the boundary of the *burh*, sectioning off the north-east corner with a deep ditch and a wooden palisade, thus securing the island. Although William had many English castles built, his chief residence was Carisbrooke Castle.



A daunting fortress indeed (photo by Alan Santillo)

When William FitzOsbern died in 1071, his son Roger continued with the fortification, although he had rebellion in mind. In 1078, an uprising against the king failed. Roger was deprived of his lands and sentenced to perpetual imprisonment, while the castle was then controlled by the Crown.

In 1082, Carisbrooke achieved notoriety when William the Conqueror arrested his traitorous half-brother Odo there. As well as being a character from Star Trek, Odo is a striking name of Germanic origin meaning 'possessor of wealth'.

In 1100, the Isle of Wight became part of an influential lordship created by King Henry I (c.1068-1135, reign from 1100). He granted the lordship to a most trusted advisor, Richard de Redvers, 1st feudal baron of Plympton in Devon and Lord of the Isle of Wight (c.1066-1107).

The castle at that point was a motte and bailey design, with defences of earth and wood. Richard set about replacing the main wooden defensive enclosure with stone, although his son Baldwin, 1st Earl of Devon and Lord of the Isle of Wight (?-1155) completed the curtain wall and built a shell keep (a stone structure circling the top of a motte).

After King Henry I's death, the civil war known as The Anarchy erupted, with a fight for the throne between Henry's daughter Matilda and his nephew Stephen. Baldwin de Redvers supported Matilda and in 1136, after being defeated in the fight against Stephen, he took refuge at Carisbrooke. He was pursued, the castle was besieged and the water supply of its well dried up. The result of this was Baldwin's exile until Stephen agreed to a peace treaty in 1153, whereupon Baldwin returned to Carisbrooke and built a new well. Lesson learned.

The de Redvers family owned Carisbrooke until November 1293, when the last descendant died. This was the splendidly named Countess Isabella de Fortibus, a rich widow aged 25, who had inherited the castle in 1260. It was the primary residence of her far-flung estates and she made extensive improvements. On her death bed, she sold the castle to King Edward I and it was then in the care of wardens as representatives of the Crown.

The distinctive drum towers were added to the gatehouse in 1335, but from 1336 to 1370, the Isle of Wight was raided five times. In 1337, King Edward III (1327-77) began the Hundred Years War with France and in 1377 there was a significant attack. The French landed in the north, destroying several towns before besieging Carisbrooke Castle. However, a crossbow shot aimed through an arrow slit in the west wall killed the French commander, resulting in their withdrawal. More defensive upgrades were carried out after this attack – the gatehouse was heightened and gun-loops added. Again, lesson learned.

Carisbrooke was rather neglected throughout the 15th and early 16th centuries, although Anthony Woodville (brother of Elizabeth, Edward IV's queen) made some improvements. In 1588, the Spanish Armada was launched with a plan to invade England via the Solent and the Isle of Wight. The castle was in the picture again and urgent attempts were made to render it capable of coping with artillery by modifying the southern towers. Further invasion rumours in 1596-97 resulted in more radical upgrades, with arrowhead bastions added around the castle, although these artillery improvements were never used in action.

At the onset of the Civil War in 1642, Carisbrooke's governor was the Royalist Jerome, Earl of Portland. However, the mayor of Newport was a Parliamentarian and demanded the castle's surrender. As it was tenanted only by Lady Portland, her children and a few servants, it was surrendered without any shots fired. The castle was then kept by Philip, Earl of Pembroke until 1647, when he was succeeded by Colonel Robert Hammond.

Carisbrooke's main use until 1660 was as a prison for Royalists of status, its most famous detainee being King Charles I (1625-49). He had surrendered to the Scots after his defeat in May 1646 and had been handed over to Parliament. While his future was being decided, he had sneakily escaped from house arrest at Hampton Court and fled to Carisbrooke Castle.

He had been hoping to continue his cause from there, as although Colonel Hammond was the Parliamentarian governor of the Isle of Wight, he was the brother of King Charles' chaplain and thought to be a secret Royalist. He certainly afforded Charles I a degree of freedom, if being allowed to drive around the island in his coach and having a bowling green created for him on the barbican outside the castle is anything to go by.

Unfortunately, Charles had misjudged Hammond. After a pro-Royalist officer attempted to raise local people to help the king's release, there was growing distrust in Parliament and Hammond confined him to the castle. This prompted Charles to plan his breakout...

He was still in touch with supporters and smuggled out secret messages via his chambermaid. On the night of 20th March 1648, horses and a boat were waiting for the king to escape from his bedroom window into the courtyard below, using a length of rope. There was a fatal flaw, however, as although his head made it through the window, his chest and shoulders became entirely stuck. Extrication from the window must have been ignominious to say the least.

Such an embarrassing misadventure failed to dampen his spirits and another escape was planned for two months later, on the 28th May. He had been moved to a more secure bedroom and this time the bars on his window had been loosened beforehand with nitric acid and his guards bribed. Unfortunately, he was betrayed by two of the guards, who had proceeded to inform Colonel Hammond and his escape was once more abandoned.

Charles left Carisbrooke on 6th September 1648 with the approval of Parliament, to take part in negotiations at the island's capital of Newport. These negotiations failed and he was moved to the mainland, ending up in London. Impatience with Charles's intrigues led to him being charged with treason and executed in Whitehall on 30th January 1649. It would have been a whole lot different if he'd managed to squeeze through that window...

A visit to the chapel later showed Charles was remembered well at Carisbrooke:



Copy of Charles I bust by Gianlorenzo Bernini

After the execution, two of his three children were brought to Carisbrooke in August 1650 (his other son Charles having escaped). They were treated well, but his 14-year-old daughter Princess Elizabeth died there of pneumonia soon afterwards and was buried in the parish church at Newport. His son Henry was released in 1653 and joined his family abroad.

The importance of Carisbrooke declined in the later 17th century, as defences moved back to the coast. It did, however, remain the occasional residence of the island's governors, some of whom carried out alterations and repairs.

By the mid-19th century, it was no longer used as a residence, but still served as a military base for the island's militia. By then, many of its buildings were in poor repair, although its role was changing into a tourist attraction, passing into the care of the Office of Works in 1856.

While watching the film in the guardhouse, I'd been interested to learn that Princess Beatrice, Victoria and Albert's youngest daughter, had lived at the castle. Queen Victoria had appointed her as governor of the Isle of Wight in 1896 and she had lived at Osborne Cottage on the Osborne Estate until 1912, when she moved to the governor's house at Carisbrooke.

She made many alterations to the castle, including restoring the gatehouse and changing the kitchen garden to her own private Edwardian Garden – and I cannot believe that we failed to visit the current Princess Beatrice Garden designed by one of my gardening gurus, Chris Beardshaw, opened in 2009. This is a dreadful oversight that frankly needs to be remedied. In retrospect, I'm pretty sure it was the fault of the weather.

The volatile weather had turned against us as we emerged from the gatehouse. The rain was blowing in our faces, so we made haste to the nearby chapel of St Nicholas. In 1738, it was demolished and rebuilt in the Georgian style, but in 1904 Princess Beatrice commissioned the aptly named local architect Percy Stone to restore it to its current pseudo-medieval form.



Chapel of St Nicholas after the rain (photo by Alan Santillo)

This restoration had originally been carried out to mark the 250th anniversary of Charles I's execution, but in 1929, Percy Stone redecorated it to serve as a war memorial for the dead of the whole island after World War I, which seems far more fitting. The pews had been made from one of the last wooden warships, *HMS Nettle*, so we sheltered happily amid history and wonderful ceilings.

The full name of the chapel was St Nicholas-in-Castro (although I've annoyingly failed to find out why) and for a simple rectangular building, it held a lot of interest. There was an entrance porch with a delightful ceiling that compelled me to photograph it by craning my neck at a hideously uncomfortable angle. I was a little bemused at how many people appeared not to look up with appropriate awe – or even to look up at all:



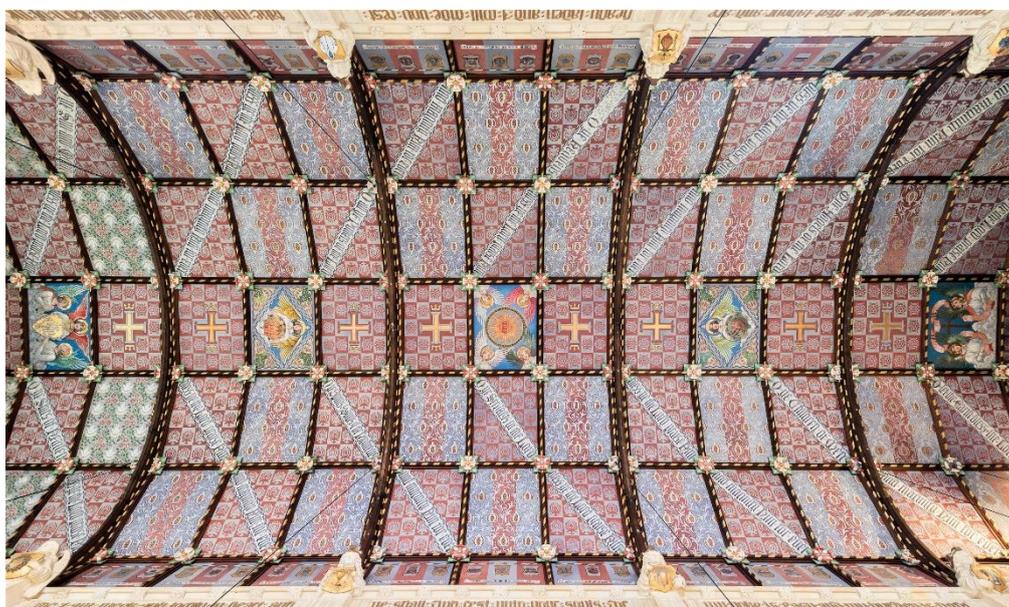
The delightful ceiling

On progressing into the chapel itself, the sight of Alan kneeling by the pews with his camera pointing upward seemed to result in more of the other visitors glancing heavenward. They were probably glad they did, as the ceiling was really quite heavenly. The interior itself was also beautiful, with the wooden pews lined on either side of the nave and a fine stained-glass window.

Princess Beatrice had commissioned the altar painting following the death of her youngest son, Maurice, at Ypres in World War I. It's often occurred to me how it tends to be the smaller snippets of information that make a historic visit really come to life. I found it hard to take a photo of the chapel that did it any justice at all, but Alan managed to work his magic:



Chapel of St Nicholas-in-Castro (photo by Alan Santillo)



A heavenly ceiling (photo by Alan Santillo)

There was a break in the clouds as we left the chapel to follow a walk on the guide map, which tempted with intriguing features such as 'Isabella's window' and 'Charles I's window'. However, as I was reading an information board by the latter, another squally shower suddenly arrived. We reluctantly decided to give up and instead headed across to investigate the Constable's Lodging (where King Charles I had initially been imprisoned), followed by the Great Hall and the Carisbrooke Castle Museum.

I can't say I ever thought I'd find myself standing in the bedroom of King Charles I, it seemed decidedly bizarre! Princess Beatrice had afterwards used it as a dining room, but it still had some original features and the bed of the man himself had been moved back into the room. In fact, it was quite easy to gaze at the four-poster bed where he'd slept and imagine him lying there, pondering his escape and plotting his return to power.



Castle museum in the domestic buildings (photo by Alan Santillo)

The other stand-out feature of the visit 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 had some amazing Charles I memorabilia, including two letters written by him during his enforced stay at Carisbrooke. For the rest of the day, I kept thinking: 'I have seen Charles I's handwriting!'

One feature of Carisbrooke that we were unable to appreciate properly was the well-house with its working donkey wheel, situated near the domestic buildings. We did go and look at it, but it was deserted, with not a donkey in sight. Normally, the wheel with its donkeys is a great attraction and creates long queues, but presumably the weather was a factor.

When the castle's water supply failed in 1136, a new deep well was dug in the courtyard and was in use until the castle was linked to the water main in the early 20th century (although Princess Beatrice preferred water from the well rather than the new-fangled tap). A well-house built over the well, complete with a treadmill, has been in existence since 1291. The treadmill was replaced in 1334 and then the well-house was rebuilt in 1587 with a huge oak wheel.

It's thought prisoners were originally used to raise buckets from the well bottom, although since at least 1696, the task was carried out by a team of donkeys. The well still contains 12 metres/39 feet of water and nowadays there are six donkeys to demonstrate how the water wheel once worked – but not today.

A small point of literary interest is that the well is also famous as the hiding place of the Mohune diamond in *Moonfleet* – an adventure story written by J Meade Falkner and first published in 1898. I do remember reading the book...

My feeling on leaving Carisbrooke was mixed. I was delighted with all the history concerning King Charles I, as well as the Princess Beatrice connection (apart from missing her re-created garden). In retrospect, we should have waited for better weather, so we could have investigated the outside properly. If we go to the Isle of Wight again, a further visit to Carisbrooke is an absolute must!