



EXPLORE ENGLAND

ON THE TRAIL OF TENNYSON

The Isle of Wight hosted many artistic greats of Victorian England. Susie Boulton follows in their footsteps . . .



It is impossible to imagine a prettier spot," Queen Victoria said of her beloved royal hideaway, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight.

She and Albert had sought a rural retreat far removed from the stresses of court life, and were captivated by the tranquillity and natural beauty of the island.

Victoria enjoyed living by the sea and often went swimming from her private beach, discreetly entering the water in her bathing machine.

Lying across the Solent from the coast of Hampshire, the diamond-shaped Isle of Wight is the smallest county in the country after Rutland, and is often referred to as "England in Miniature".



On the Tennyson Trail.

For its size, the island packs in a remarkable diversity of attractions, from dramatic coastlines and quaint villages to famous festivals and dinosaur fossils.

It is one of the last retreats in southern England of the red squirrel, its south coast is home to the rare Glanville Fritillary butterfly and the county flower is the pyramidal orchid which grows up to two feet high, and flourishes thanks to the chalk grassland and the island's benign climate.

Modern-day Isle of Wight can't boast the host of celebrities it saw in the Victorian era, but there are a few claims to fame: actors Jeremy Irons and Sheila Hancock were born here; Bear Grylls was raised here and Alan

Titchmarsh lives in Cowes.

The Kray Twins spent time on the island (though not of their choosing), incarcerated at the famous high-security prison, Parkhurst.

On the cultural side though, it is the Victorian legacy which stands out. It was the Victorians who first made the island fashionable.

Wealthy visitors started arriving in the early 19th century on the new ferry service across the Solent from Portsmouth to Ryde.

They were later followed by the cream of Victorian society, lured by the royal link, the scenery and the sea air which was famously described by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as "worth sixpence a pint".

By the time Tennyson moved to the island in 1853 he was the country's leading poet.

He and his wife, Emily, had fallen in love with Farringford, a remote neo-gothic house on the peaceful western tip of the island, reaching down to the sea.

Victoria and Albert were both ardent admirers of Tennyson's work. No

sooner had he moved in to Farringford than Prince Albert paid a visit unannounced, leaving with a bunch of cowslips for the Queen and a promise that she would visit.

The majority of the visitors to Farringford were writers, artists and intellectuals – a sort of early Bloomsbury Group who acquired the

name The Freshwater Circle.

"Everybody is either a genius, or a poet or a painter or peculiar in some way," wrote Anne Thackeray, daughter of novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, on her visit to Freshwater in 1865.

Among them were Robert Browning; Henry Wadsworth



Top, left to right: the Tennyson Monument and the Needles. Above: the Queen's bathing machine.

English Heritage



Farringford, now restored to its former glory.



Alfred, Lord Tennyson.



English Heritage.

Osborne, Victoria's favourite home.



Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

> Longfellow; Charles Darwin; Lewis Carroll; Edward Lear; George Frederic Watts; and the pre-Raphaelite painters William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais.

Charles Dickens rented Winterbourne Country House at Bonchurch in 1849, where he worked on his novel *David Copperfield*.

"I have taken a most delightful and beautiful house . . . cool, airy, private bathing, everything delicious," he wrote to his wife. "I think it is the prettiest place I ever saw in my life, at home or abroad."

Charles Darwin, escaping from an outbreak of scarlet fever in his Shropshire village, stayed with his family at Sandown and Shanklin in

1858, the year he began writing *The Origin Of Species*.

Karl Marx described the island as "a little paradise" and took the sea air at Ventnor for his failing health, while Sir Winston Churchill spent happy summer holidays as a child, also in Ventnor, in the company of his nanny and brother.

Today's visitors to the island can follow in the path of Victorian celebrities and visit Farringford (www.farringford.co.uk) with all its literary associations.

Initially Tennyson rented the house, but with the profits from his hugely popular poem, "Maud", he was able to buy the estate in 1853.

The poet lived here for nearly 40

years with his wife, Emily, and two sons, until his death in 1892.

The house was subsequently occupied by three more generations of Tennysons, then sold in 1945 to British Holiday Estates, Ltd. (later Thomas Cook) and converted into a hotel.

Farringford today belongs to Rebecca Fitzgerald, an islander and art expert who has spent the last five years meticulously restoring the house.

She has been stripping back endless layers of paint; restoring rotting timbers; sourcing copies of original wallpaper and furnishing the house as it would have been in Tennyson's time.

A guided tour reveals much about the poet. His eccentricities, depression, addiction to port, tobacco (and apple pie!) and his private life with the family.

An affectionate father, he played football, picked flowers and went hunting for fossils with his young sons.

The saintly, uncomplaining Emily worked tirelessly as his secretary, editor and letter-writer.

Among Tennyson's prolific output was *Charge of the Light Brigade*, drafted on High Down (now Tennyson Down); *Crossing the Bar*, scribbled on the Solent, and *Enoch Arden*, penned in the summer house.

Although Tennyson enjoyed the wealth and adulation that came with



Farringford Estate.

The library at Farringford.

fame he had a strong aversion to the legion of fans (or Cockneys, as he called them) who flocked to Farringford.

He was a compulsive walker and a bridge was designed so he could reach High Down to avoid the tourists at the garden gate.

Clad in his flowing cape and broad-brimmed hat he would walk for miles, striding across the chalk grasslands towards the iconic Needles, admiring the coastal scenery.

Today the Down is crowned by the Tennyson memorial cross.

One of Tennyson's close friends and admirers, Julia Margaret Cameron, lived a few hundred yards away at Dimbola Lodge, and she installed a special gate at the back of her property so the poet could walk through the fields in private.

A pioneering photographer, Cameron moved there in 1860, setting up a studio from a chicken coop and using a coal cellar as her dark room.

This free-thinking woman in a male-dominated world was given a camera by one of her six children at the age of forty-eight, and her bold experiments with close-up and soft-focus techniques were to influence many later movements in photographic art.

Renowned for her portraits of "famous men and fair women", she also photographed family, locals and her maids. The cobbler's daughter became a model for Madonnas.

Dimbola, which was named after the family's coffee plantations in Dimbula, Ceylon, became a literary and artistic salon, with Cameron hosting social events for Tennyson and his bohemian friends.

Eminent "poets, prophets and painters" of the century were cajoled into posing, frequently for hours, in theatrical costumes. Tennyson warned fellow poet Longfellow: "You will have to do whatever she tells you; I will come back soon and see what is left of you."

Dimbola was threatened with partial

Victoria died at Osborne in 1901

demolition in 1993 and a Trust was established to restore it as the Dimbola Museum and Gallery. It is full of Cameron's theatrical portraits, and also serves as a showcase for contemporary photographers and a venue for art courses.

The Chair of the Trust is the delightfully eccentric Brian Hinton, a rock'n'roll-loving author, poet, academic musicologist and librarian.

Lured by fond memories of the famous 1970 Isle of Wight Festival, where he saw Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and The Doors perform, Hinton left his job as an academic researcher at Oxford for a post at the Freshwater Library and Gallery.

He is passionate about the ongoing restoration of Dimbola, as is Project Manager Michael Robinson, a lifelong photographer.

Long before Tennyson and Cameron were established on the island, Victoria and Albert had bought the Osborne estate.

The view from the terrace of the Solent reminded Albert of the Bay of Naples, and in partnership with master builder Thomas Cubitt, he pulled down the Georgian house and built a much larger villa in the style of an Italian Renaissance palace.

Victoria spent three to four months here every year and made it her permanent home after the death of Albert.

"I long for our cheerful and unpalace-like rooms at Osborne," she wrote to her daughter in 1858 from Windsor Castle.

She died at Osborne in 1901.

Today's visitors to Osborne (www.english-heritage.org.uk) can admire the glorious grounds, gardens and sea views; the sumptuous state rooms where the Queen entertained VIPs; the family rooms, including the nursery for their nine children; and Victoria's bedchamber where she died.

A visit also offers a fascinating insight into the royal couple's life.

The influence India had on Victoria is nowhere more apparent than Osborne's "Indian wing" which was added to the main house in 1890.



The famed Carisbrooke Castle.

> The Durbar Corridor is hung with portraits of a cross-section of Indians, reflecting the queen's interest in her Indian empire and its people.

These include Abdul Karim, familiar to those who saw the 2017 film *Victoria* and Abdul in which the monarch forms a deep attachment to her young Indian servant.

The film was partially shot on location at Osborne.

The elaborate Durbar Room, for entertaining European royalty, was restored in 2015 with a splendid banqueting table laid up as it would have been in the 1890s.

Every inch of the Indian-style room is richly embellished and either side are showcases of exquisitely crafted gold, silver and ivory gifts from the sub-continent.

A stroll down through the woods brings you to the private beach where Victoria used to swim. Her bathing machine, a wooden contraption on rails, has been fully restored.

The Queen wrote of her first experience sea-bathing in her journal, of July 30, 1847.

“Drove down to the beach with my

maids and went into the bathing machine, where I undressed and bathed in the sea, a very nice bathing woman attending me.

“I thought it delightful till I put my head under the water, when I thought I should be stifled.”

Victorian visitors would often pay a visit to Carisbrooke Castle, a centre of power and defence for centuries.

The Norman motte-and-bailey castle is most famously associated with Charles I who was held prisoner here from 1647-48, leading up to his trial and execution in London.

Visitors can view his bedchamber and the room from which he tried in vain to escape, getting wedged in the bars of the little window.

Three centuries earlier the castle was home to Countess Isabella de Fortibus, a hugely wealthy widow who inherited the Lordship of the Isle of Wight.

All her six children predeceased her and she sold the island to Edward I just before her death.

The royal links continued into the 20th century when Princess Beatrice, youngest daughter of Queen Victoria,

was appointed Governor of the island after the death of her husband, and took up residence here in 1912.

Today, thanks to an English Heritage apartment inside the castle walls, residency is on offer to one and all.

The Isle of Wight tourism website (www.visitisleofwight.co.uk) suggests a Literary Heroes Trail including villages, seaside towns and viewpoints which inspired its literary visitors – not just Victorian ones.

There are references to Virginia Woolf, great-niece of Julia Margaret Cameron, who stayed here and wrote a farce called *Freshwater*.

It lovingly poked fun at the circle of eccentrics and D.H. Lawrence, who used Freshwater Bay as the setting for his second novel, *The Trespasser*.

From more recent times there are writers born on the island, notably Oscar-winning screenwriter and director Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient*, 1996).

Whether it is through visitors inspired by this beguiling island or homespun talent, may the literary links live on.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

WHERE TO STAY

THE GEORGE

Quay Street, Yarmouth, Isle of Wight, PO41 0PE; www.thegeorge.co.uk. Tel: 01983 760331. £125-£200.

A 17th-century townhouse on the water's edge, previously home to an Island Governor who entertained King Charles II. Original architectural features, comfy boutique rooms and fine dining combine to make for memorable stays.

THE SEAVIEW HOTEL

High Street, Seaview, PO34 5EX; www.seaviewhotel.co.uk. Tel: 01983 612711. £105-£190.

A stone's throw from the sea in the village of Seaview, this converted Victorian townhouse offers a warm welcome and comfy, contemporary rooms. The restaurant, with maritime decor and a focus on fish, has earned a Michelin Bib Gourmand for outstanding, affordable food.

NORTH HOUSE

32 Sun Hill, Cowes, PO31 7HY; www.northhousecowes.co.uk. Tel: 01983 209453. £99-£195.

A chic boutique hotel cleverly converted from listed Georgian townhouses. Guest rooms are a good size and come equipped with Nespresso coffee machines, mini-bar, some with wet-rooms or roll-top baths.

Don't miss out on delicious fish dishes at the Oyster Store Restaurant.

VILLA ROTHSAY

29 Baring Road, Cowes. PO31 8DF; www.villa-rothsay.co.uk. Tel: 01983 295178. £90-£165.

Victorian villa overlooking the Solent where guests return year after year, many of them among the sailing fraternity and some of them celebrities. It oozes old-fashioned charm. The drawing-room, with antiques, honesty bar and piles of maritime books has fine views.

HILLSIDE

151 Mitchell Avenue, Ventnor, PO38 1DR; www.hillsideventnor.co.uk. Tel: 01938 852271. £156-£206.

A thatched house set high above the town, with fine views across Ventnor to the sea. The owner is Dutch and the decor is elegant Scandinavian, with a superb collection of CoBrA art. The restaurant makes the most of produce from the five-acre garden.

WHERE TO EAT

(prices are for a two-course meal with wine).

THOMPSON'S

11 Town Lane, Newport, PO30 1JU; www.robertthompson.co.uk;



Tel: 01983 526118; £50. (closed Sun, Mon and off season Tue).

Chef Robert Thompson was the youngest British chef to earn a Michelin star, aged 23. He opened his first solo restaurant here in 2015. It's lively and stylish, and his sublime dishes make the most of island produce. Menus vary from excellent-value lunches to the 8-course tasting menu with matching Wine Flight.

GARLIC FARM CAFÉ

Mersley Lane, Newport, PO36 0NR; www.thegarlicfarm.co.uk. Tel: 01938 867333; £20. (normally breakfast and lunch only). Wafts of garlic greet you as you arrive at this little café on the island's popular Garlic Farm and seventy-five per cent of the dishes contain garlic. Try the black pudding burger, the whole roasted garlic bulb or the mezze sharing platter, followed perhaps by the black garlic sundae.

THE HUT

Colwell Chine Road, Colwell Bay, Freshwater, PO40 9NP; www.thehutcolwell.co.uk. Tel: 01983 898637; £40 (open Apr to Oct only). Don't expect a little shack – this sizeable restaurant

serves up the likes of beetroot gravadlax with local white crab and fennel ceviche, giant scallops or grilled lobster as well as more standard café fare. Many diners arrive by boat – they will pick you up from your mooring.

TAVERNERS

High Street, Godshell, PO38 3HZ; www.thetavernersgodshell.co.uk; Tel: 01983 840707; £30. (closed Sun evening). This welcoming country pub in picturesque Godshell is popular for its local real ales and dishes using home-grown and other local produce. The menu has pub classics including a wonderful suet-crust beef and ale pie, along with more sophisticated fare from the Specials Board.

GETTING THERE

You can get to the Isle of Wight from London by train and ferry in around two hours. Wightlink (www.wightlink.co.uk) operates vehicle ferries from Portsmouth to Fishbourne and from Lymington to Yarmouth. Red Funnel (www.redfunnel.co.uk) links Southampton and East Cowes (60 mins) and has a passenger-only ferry from Southampton to West Cowes (25 mins). For the fastest route take the 10-minute trip on the world's last remaining commercial hovercraft service, linking Southsea in Portsmouth and Ryde. For island buses: www.islandbuses.info