



The Royal Yacht Squadron

A short history

Revised edition 2020

Welcome to the Royal Yacht Squadron and its Castle in Cowes. For visitors and guests this little book gives a brief insight into the history of the Castle, the Squadron and its customs.

Generations of members and staff have left their mark in the special atmosphere of this place. The sea and yachting – both cruising and racing – have always been at the heart of it, together with friendship, respect, good manners, and service to the Nation.

HISTORY

1815-1850

The Yacht Club, as the Squadron was first known, was founded at the Thatched House Tavern in London on 1st June 1815. Of the 42 original members, about half were landowning nobility, half were country gentlemen, two were merchants and one a clergyman. All had a keen interest in sailing, which was in its infancy as a sport. For a gentleman to qualify as a member he had to own a vessel 'not under 10 tons'. (Today this is defined as a lady or gentleman 'actively interested in yachting'.)

A close association with the Royal Navy began in 1816, when Admiral Sir

Thomas Hardy (Nelson's Captain at Trafalgar in 1805) headed the list of Naval members. The Prince Regent was welcomed as a member in 1817. In 1820, when the Prince became King George IV, the Club's name changed to 'The Royal Yacht Club'.

In 1826, the Club first organised yacht races as a feature of the annual regatta at Cowes for pilot cutters and customs boats. The growing popularity of yacht racing led to the need for regulation, and in 1828 a rule was introduced requiring a yacht on the port tack to give way to another on starboard.

The first Commodore, Lord Yarborough, in his 150-ton brig *Falcon* led rallies in the 1820s and 1830s to Cherbourg, where races were held and stores of wine were

purchased for the season. This was the start of a long and happy relationship with the French wine merchants.

The fast-evolving design of racing yachts led to improvements in ships for the Navy, and in 1835 the Club was named 'The Royal Yacht Squadron' by command of King William IV in 'gracious approval of an institution of such national utility'.

In 1841 steam-powered yachts were first permitted at the Squadron.

1850-1880

Lord Wilton as Commodore presided over three decades of achievement and incident. Racing and worldwide cruising flourished.

Ben Boyd, in his schooner *Wanderer*, visited the Solomon Islands and was devoured by cannibals. James Brooke helped rid the South China Sea of pirates and was made Rajah of Sarawak.

In 1851, Commodore Stevens of the New York Yacht Club sailed the schooner *America* across the Atlantic for the Great Exhibition. In Cowes as a guest of the Squadron, he challenged for the £100 Cup for a race around the Isle of Wight. *America* won the race, watched by Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales. *America's* victory sent shock-waves through British yachting. The Marquess of Anglesey was so surprised by her speed that he thought she must have a propeller.

That £100 Cup was subsequently renamed 'The America's Cup' and is now the world's oldest international sporting trophy.

In 1855, the Squadron leased the Castle from the Government and commissioned the architect Anthony Salvin to convert it from a coastal fortress to a clubhouse. On 6th July 1858 the Signalman's ledger recorded, 'Hoisted the flag of the R.Y.S. at the Castle'.

During the Crimean War of 1853–6, Squadron yachts took supplies to British soldiers. The Earl of Cardigan and several other officers were Squadron members.

In 1870, at the end of the Franco-Prussian War, Sir John Burgoyne

spirited the Empress Eugénie away from France in his cutter *Gazelle*. In 1876-7 Lord Brassey's *Sunbeam* made the first round-the-world voyage by yacht, covering 15,000 miles (out of 27,800) under sail, the remainder under power from her steam engines.

1880-1914

A Golden Age of Cowes was heralded by the election of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) as Commodore. His nephew, the German Emperor Wilhelm II, impressed by the vigour of yachting in Britain, was determined to establish a similar tradition in Germany. He brought his yacht *Meteor* to Cowes in 1892, which encouraged the Prince to commission *Britannia* from the Glasgow

designer G.F. Watson. She proved to be one of the most successful racing yachts of all time.

The royalty and aristocracy of Europe, and numerous heiresses from the USA, including Winston Churchill's mother Jenny, were regular visitors to the Castle. During Cowes Week, every day after racing, afternoon tea was served on the lawn and brass bands played. In the evening, magnificent dinners and parties were held on members' yachts or at their summer homes on the Island.

1914-1945

The First World War shattered this tranquil scene on 3rd August 1914 – the first day of Cowes Week. The regatta was cancelled – and stayed cancelled for

the next five years. Squadron yachts and yachtsmen played a significant part in the war, the larger yachts serving as hospital ships, minesweepers, submarine hunters and escort vessels. Squadron members served in both the Army and Navy, six winning the Victoria Cross. A flamboyant naval member, the Scottish landowner Mansfield Smith-Cumming, created MI6 in 1916.

During the War the Castle was offered for sale by the Government and bought by the Squadron as its permanent home.

Wounded servicemen were offered hospitality, among them the poet Robert Graves.

After the First World War, yachting struggled to re-establish itself. King

George V, who loved sailing *Britannia*, took a lead in bringing the big yachts back to racing. Meanwhile Sir Philip Hunloke, the King's Sailing master, was the founding President of the newly formed Ocean Racing Club and, with Sir Ralph Gore, encouraged the Fastnet Race, first won by *Jolie Brise* in 1925. However, the focus was still on the big class and the public flocked to Cowes to see the 'J' Class yachts – *Britannia*, *Shamrock*, *Endeavour*, *Valsheda* – race majestically past the Green.

In the Second World War the Castle was commissioned by the Royal Navy as HMS *Vectis*, to serve as the headquarters of 'J' Force, carrying troops to Normandy for D-Day.

After the War, at the suggestion of the naturalist and Olympic yachtsman Peter Scott, King George VI presented the Britannia Cup, still today one of the most sought-after trophies for big boats during Cowes Week.

1945-2000

The decade of austerity following the end of the War saw another battle to revive the sport of sailing. *Bluebottle*, the Dragon presented to the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh by the Island Sailing Club, helped to give small boat racing a kick start. In 1958 Hugh Goodson headed a Squadron syndicate making the first postwar challenge for the America's Cup. Tommy Sopwith won the first offshore power boat race to

Torquay in 1961. The moving spirit behind this and the new London Boat Show was Squadron member Max Aitken, Battle of Britain pilot, sailor and heir to the Beaverbrook press empire.

From 1961 to 1968, the Duke of Edinburgh was Commodore of the RYS. He reorganised the governance of the Squadron and of Cowes Week, bringing the clubs that ran it under a single administration. He formally admitted ladies to the Squadron as Associate Members and refurbished the Castle, introducing central heating and wash basins to the bedrooms.

In 1966–7 Francis Chichester sailed alone round the world, as did Alec Rose in 1967–8 and Robin Knox-Johnston non-stop a year later. All were made

Honorary Members of the Squadron.
Edward Heath, while serving as Prime Minister, won the 1969 Sydney–Hobart Race with *Morning Cloud*.

2000 to the present

The Pavilion, designed by Thomas Croft, was opened in 2000. This provides on-shore facilities for yachtsmen and their families as well as a space for local and national events. It has enabled the Squadron to host numerous international regattas, including the World Swans, 8 Metres and Etchells, and the spectacular 2001 Jubilee Regatta for the 150th Anniversary of the America's Cup. The Haven was added in 2009, offering berths for members' and guests' yachts.

In 2015, to mark the Club's Bicentenary, a new charitable fund was created, the Isle of Wight Foundation, which awards scholarships to young islanders wishing to pursue a career connected with the sea. In the same year, ladies were admitted for the first time as full members, and an Academy for youth sail training was set up.

Two further challenges for the America's Cup have been made by the Squadron since then, under the leadership of the Olympic gold medallist Sir Ben Ainslie.

DISTINGUISHED AND UNUSUAL MEMBERS

There is a long list of members who could be included in this section, and it would occupy a book on its own.

However, to take just a very small sample:

- Sir William Curtis (1752–1829) was widely known as ‘Billy the Biscuit’ because he supplied ship’s biscuits to the Navy. Mocked by opponents for his cockney accent and unpolished manners, he was generous, public-spirited, and a trusted friend of George IV. Notwithstanding his humble beginnings, he was one of the founding members of the Club, although he missed the inaugural meeting for the best possible reason – he was cruising in the St Petersburg

area in his 76-ton converted Arab dhow, *Rebecca Maria*.

- John Lambton, 1st Earl of Durham (1792–1840). A driving force behind the Great Reform Bill of 1832, which outlawed rotten boroughs, hereditary parliamentary seats and other corrupt political traditions. This made him unpopular with his fellow Club members, since many of them were MPs under the old system. An enlightened and philanthropic landowner, he was known as ‘Radical Jack’ for his support of universal suffrage and workers’ rights.
- Robert Stephenson (1803–59), the railway engineer, was also a yachtsman who owned *Titania*, the

only yacht to accept a challenge for a private match against *America* in 1851.

- William Henry Smith (1825–1891) made his fortune from the W.H. Smith chain of railway bookstalls, and later went into politics. In 1877, he was made First Lord of the Admiralty and Lord Warden of the Cinque ports despite knowing little of the sea. He was lampooned as Sir Joseph Porter by Gilbert and Sullivan in *HMS Pinafore*, and Disraeli called him 'Pinafore Smith'. He lost office when the Government fell, and, having become interested in the sea, in 1880 bought the 500-ton yacht *Pandora* which he cruised extensively.

- Sir Claud Champion de Crespigny (1847–1935) was a boxer, big game hunter, steeplechaser, swimmer, balloonist, crack shot, and a generally fanatical Victorian sportsman who believed that all life's problems could be solved by hard exercise. In the 1920s he was immortalised in the Bateman cartoon, *The Man Who Bathed From the Steps of the Royal Yacht Squadron*. A group of members asked the Commodore, Sir Richard Williams Bulkeley, to rule against this unconventional practice. The Commodore resolved the confrontation by deciding that this was to be a privilege reserved for members over the age of 80.

- Lord Lonsdale (1857–1944). Known as ‘the Yellow Earl’ for his bright livery, which was adopted by the Automobile Association in his honour. A showy and passionate sportsman (yachting, horse-racing, boxing, driving), he funded the Lonsdale Belt, which still bears his image. In the 1895 portrait of members in the Ladies’ Dining Room he stands a little apart – possibly a reflection of the hostility which his extravagant ways aroused in his contemporaries.
- Sir Hubert Parry (1848–1918), composer of the hymn *Jerusalem* and Head of the Royal College of Music 1895–1918, cruised widely in his ketch *Wanderer*. Parry continued to sail her until the outbreak of the First

World War, when she was requisitioned by the Admiralty.

- Sir Mortimer Singer (1863–1929), son of the American sewing machine manufacturer Isaac Singer, was a breeder of racehorses, a pioneer of cycling and motoring, and holder of UK pilot's licence No 8. He converted his house, Milton Hill, into a 220-bed military hospital in 1914, paying all its expenses and managing it with his wife throughout the war. He was a keen yachtsman in his large cutter, the 23-metre *Astra*.
- The 5th Earl of Carnarvon (1866–1923) was a breeder of racehorses and a keen amateur Egyptologist. He came to prominence as the patron of the archaeologist Howard Carter,

who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun. Carnarvon succumbed to septicaemia in Cairo following a mosquito bite. It was a story extensively covered by the world's press which speculated on the Earl's death as a manifestation of the 'Mummy's Curse'.

- The Antarctic explorers Robert Falcon Scott (1868–1912) and Ernest Shackleton (1874–1922) were both members.
- Guglielmo Marconi (1874–1937), the radio pioneer, was elected to the Squadron in 1922. He bought the yacht *Rovenska* in 1919, fitted her out as an ocean-going wireless laboratory, and changed her name to *Elettra*. She had served as a Royal

Navy patrol and escort vessel in the First World War; in 1943 she was commandeered by the German Navy and sunk by the RAF off the coast of Croatia in January 1944.

THE CASTLE

Henry VIII built the Castle in 1539 as a deterrent to foreign invasion. It was one of two forts guarding the entrance to the Medina River. The eastern fort was built on the sandy foreshore and was soon lost to the sea, but the western one, on its rocky promontory, survives. Its cannon fired in anger only once, in 1642 during the Civil War. Now, the 22 cannon which once belonged to the *Royal Adelaide*, a scaled-down frigate built for the children of the Royal Family in 1834, are fired to start yacht races and signal to the winners that they have crossed the finishing line.

Major alterations were made to the Castle in 1716 but the principal changes

took place after the lease was transferred to the Squadron in 1855. Anthony Salvin was given the job of improving the building “replete with every comfort and luxury”. He made extensive alterations, adding the Platform, a Ballroom for summer use and the Western Tower.

There were further developments in the 1920s, but the next major alterations were made in 1964 when the Duke of Edinburgh was Commodore. The Club was able to acquire stone for this work from the demolition of East Cowes Castle. The old pine-panelled gentlemen’s heads became the Ladies’ Dining Room and the Balcony was added in a light ‘Festival of Britain’ style. The corrugated iron Platform roof needed constant repair and was replaced

in fibreglass by Ove Arup. The Platform was linked to the Ladies' Drawing Room by the Bird Cage in 1988.

Further refurbishments and modernisations have been carried out every winter since then.

CUSTOMS AND CURIOSITIES

There are 554 Members of the Royal Yacht Squadron, 75 Naval Members, and 60 Honorary Members. British members are permitted to fly the White Ensign on their yachts, a privilege dating back to 1829 that became unique to the Squadron in 1859. The only other vessels permitted to fly the White Ensign are ships of the Royal Navy.

Candidates for membership are proposed by existing members and elected by ballot at a general meeting – either the Spring Meeting, held in London, or the Regatta Meeting, held in Cowes. Other annual events include a Winter Dinner, a History Weekend, the Trafalgar Night Dinner, a Race Training

Week, several regattas, the chief of which is Cowes Week, and summer and winter cruises.

The Squadron is governed by a Committee headed by four Flag Officers – the Commodore, Vice Commodore, Rear Commodore Yachting and Rear Commodore Finance – each serving a term of four years. Day-to-day running is in the hands of the office and household staff under the Secretary. There is also a House Committee, a Yachting Committee and a Wine Committee. The art collection, archives, furniture, books and artefacts are looked after by Honorary Custodians.

Something of an old-world atmosphere still survives at the Castle. Following naval custom, the Squadron's Ensign is

raised each morning and lowered each evening – a ceremony also carried out by members when they are on board their yachts wherever they are in the world.

