



Inside the Castle

Sarah Norbury jumps at a rare chance to see inside the Royal Yacht Squadron, that unique and intriguing yacht club at the centre of Cowes, in its 200th anniversary year

Photos by YPS/Boat Exclusive and Paul Wyeth



ROYAL YACHT SQUADRON

◀ Far left: the visitors' book in the Hall, still in use today.
◀ Left: Captain Herringham's plaque commemorates this illustrious member's service in the Battle of Trafalgar

◀ Far left: cannon on the Platform.
◀ Left: antique Royal Yacht Squadron seal.
▼ Below: the Library, a peaceful sanctuary as well as an important archive

Flags flutter from the ramparts, race officers look down from the imposing starting platform, and at ten-minute intervals mighty brass cannon fire with such power that spectators lining the shore wince and plunge their fingers into their ears.

The Royal Yacht Squadron's Castle clubhouse is best known to most sailors as the centre of the action at Cowes Week. Puffs of smoke in the aftermath of the bangs waft across the water towards the fleets of yachts, their crews' faces pinched with concentration as they plan their beat up the rocky Island shore.

No first-timer to Cowes Week can fail to be awestruck by the Castle. Competitors mill around before their starts, staring at the flags and course-boards, getting a sight down the startline straight into the windows.

Looking is as near as most sailors ever get to this most aristocratic of clubs. Members will repair to the Squadron after racing, taking tea on the lawn, before entering the Castle for cocktails before a party or the fabulous Squadron Ball, but for the rest, the Castle itself, built by Henry VIII to repel the French, is a visual symbol of the club's exclusivity.

The most prestigious club in Britain, possibly the world, is wreathed in mystique. The only way to join this club of Kings, Lords, Hons and Sirs is to be invited by a member and be subject to a secret ballot. The fact that the membership list reads like Debretts is an indication of most sailors' chances of being invited.

It's said that wealthy tea merchant Sir Thomas Lipton was blackballed for being 'in trade', which is why his 1898 bid for the America's Cup was sponsored by the Royal Ulster YC. He was allowed in eventually, but died just two years later so scarcely had time to enjoy the Castle's delights.

Some accept a blackballing with grace, others kick up a stink, like the owner of a 150-ton schooner who, the story goes, sent a message to the club that he was anchored within close range and would commence shelling unless he

received a personal apology from Percy Shelley, son of the famous poet, who had blackballed him.

The appeal of being a member is obvious. Who wouldn't want to fly the white ensign from their stern? The Squadron is the only yacht club with a Royal Navy warrant to do so, granted in 1829. And who wouldn't want to walk boldly in to meet and drink with the great and the good?

I asked the current commodore, the Hon Christopher Sharples why, when a number of royal clubs are struggling to find new members, the Squadron has a healthy waiting list. "It's a very fine club," he responded. "People enjoy the standards and the tremendous history. Members treat the Castle as a much-loved country home."

Originally named The Yacht Club, it was founded on 1 June 1815 by a group of 42 gentleman yachting enthusiasts. Five years later, member King George IV conferred the Royal in the club's title and in 1833 King William IV renamed the club the Royal Yacht Squadron. Members met in the Thatched House Tavern in St James's, London, and in Cowes twice a year for dinner.

Today there are 535 members and dinner is served in the magnificent Members' Dining Room, under the painted gaze of illustrious past admirals and commodores. The room is adorned with silver trophies and scenes of the high seas, and waiters bring course after course from the kitchens and wine cellars below. There are bedrooms for overnight stays, a room for members to keep their 'mess kit' or black tie, which is required dress on Saturday nights, and even gun lockers for shooting parties.

But sailing is the club's raison d'être and neither a title nor a fortune are a guarantee of entry. The club professes that "any gentleman or lady actively interested in yachting" is eligible for nomination.

The Squadron was where yacht racing was born. In

▲ Above: the Platform, from where Cowes Week starts are signalled by cannon fire



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◀ Left: a painting of members greeting the Kaiser, who came to race *Meteor* in 1893. ▶ Above: the present commodore, the Hon Christopher Sharples

the early 1800s the aristocracy came to Cowes to socialise and cruise in their boats. The first races were duels between the yachts of the day, then rules for fleet racing were drawn up. The first club regatta, later to become Cowes Week, was in 1826. For more than a century the reigning monarch would be there to present the King's or Queen's trophy.

Some of history's greatest yachtsmen are on the Squadron's membership roll: Sir Thomas Sopwith, John Illingworth, Sir Francis Chichester, Sir Alec Rose, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston. Ties with the Navy are strong and some of British maritime history's most famous names have been Squadron members, not least Nelson's vice-admiral Sir Thomas Masterman Hardy who commanded HMS *Victory* at the Battle of Trafalgar, Admiral Lord Cochrane who was the inspiration for C.S. Forester's *Hornblower* novels and Admiral Sir Jeremy Black, captain of the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible* during the Falklands War.

Perhaps the club is still best known around the world for hosting the race around the Isle of Wight in 1851 won by the schooner *America*, which took home what became known as the America's Cup. The Squadron donated the Cup itself in 1851 and mounted a number of challenges to win it back.

More than 160 years later the America's Cup has still never been won by a British challenger, but now the commodore believes the Royal Yacht Squadron has "the best chance we have ever had" with its sponsorship of Ben Ainslie Racing as official British challenger for the 2017 Cup.

Bicentenary celebrations

More immediately, this year the club is celebrating its 200th anniversary in a summer-long extravaganza. The highlight will be the Squadron Regatta in July, a week of racing and what's being billed as 'spectacular social gatherings', including a grand ball for members of 25 invited clubs from around the world. Yachts from the USA and the Caribbean will arrive after crossing the Atlantic for the Regatta and then stay on for Cowes Week and the Rolex Fastnet Race.

The Squadron is gearing up for the events with a complete refurbishment of the ground floor of the Castle, as well as taking on extra staff, compiling special menus and considerably increasing the usual wine orders.

When I was invited inside the Castle for this article I was

the envy of sailing friends. Some recalled their own, never-forgotten visits, one to deliver a harp for a musical soiree, another invited by a member for a drink, surprised to discover that there is no bar; instead stewards know when top-ups are needed and appear bearing glasses on silver trays.

Like more and more sailors I had been on Squadron soil before, to the Pavilion annexe built in 2000. To help swell the coffers, the grand marquee-style building can be hired for championship dinners and class parties. With panoramic views of the Solent, as a Cowes Week après sail venue it's hard to beat, and once there, in your smart shore gear, sipping a glass of fizz and nibbling smoked salmon canapés it's easy to get above yourself and imagine just slipping into the Castle. If you try it, however, you'll get short shrift.

You could say the club is very good at welcoming non-members into its garden, or conversely that it's adept at attracting them to the periphery then holding them at bay.

There's a painting of the entire membership outside the Castle, circa 1895. In the centre stand the club's then commodore the Prince of Wales with his nephew and great yachting rival, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the Dukes of York and Connaught, while on the upper left-hand side are ladies, in their finery, standing on a lawn.

That lawn was known as the Deer Park – I'm told the ladies were known as the 'does' – and it's the only part of the Squadron's domain in which they were allowed to roam. Even Queen Victoria didn't make it into the inner sanctum – she was kept at bay in an annexe built for her on the front of the Castle, known as the Platform.

In 1964 wives, sisters and daughters of members were given their own annexe, built onto the end of the Castle in matching stone. Here, the Lams (Ladies And Associate Members) could eat in their own dining room, take tea on the balcony and watch the racing. They were not allowed to cross the carpet-rod border into the inner Castle, however.

Since then the rules have relaxed and ladies are free to enter the Castle as Lams and guests, but it was only in June 2014 that finally the new rulebook was approved that allowed women to be proposed for full membership.

The next voting session is due soon and it's likely that the first female member will be HRH Princess Anne.

The interior of the Castle is a cross between a grand ▶

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▶ Above: the magnificent Dining Room where members can host their own dinner parties. ▼ Below: Lord Hoot, made in 1881, acts as the 14th guest at dinner when necessary



Photos: P Wyeth

◀ Left: the Ladies' Drawing Room. ▶ Below: the Squadron boasts an excellent wine cellar



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country house and a maritime museum. I wish I could have stayed for days to study the paintings of Fleet Reviews throughout history, pore over the leather-bound tomes in the library and sit with a gin and tonic taking in the glorious views across the Solent.

Instead I caught glimpses of treasures and trophies taken down from the walls for the refurbishment and got a feel for the magnificent proportions of the ancient rooms, the splendour of the Platform, with its battery of brass cannon, imagining the Scottish reels danced there a few days before – this vast room hosts parties and dinners for up to 120.

In pride of place is the enormous wheel from the yacht *Victoria and Albert II*, and over an arched doorway I spied the tiller from the royal racing yacht *Bloodhound* whose mast was once the Castle's flagstaff – it was taken down for checking in 2014 and found to be past economic repair.

Members and their guests staying in the Castle in one of the 13 bedrooms, charmingly decorated in traditional style with chintz curtains and antique furniture, are treated to service every bit as good as in a five-star hotel. The commodore's room is on the top floor. Both he and the vice-commodore have their own accommodation with ensembles.

The staff of stewards, waiters and waitresses is being augmented for the summer of 2015. They expect to be fully stretched serving drinks receptions and members' dinners.

"And we'll still provide normal service for members who like to come in to sit in the Morning Room or on the balcony in need of a whisky or a Martini and lemonade," house manager Katie Waite told me. The Morning Room is Waite's favourite part of the Castle. "It's the most beautiful of them all," she said.

Stewards, dressed in three-piece suits, offer a butler service and are at members' beck and call 24 hours a day.

▲ Above left: the commodore's rooms.
▶ Right: an outsider's view of the RYS

ing your guests to superb food and drink. You can even book the entire Castle, effectively having your own country home for a day or two. If more than one member wants a room on the same date the complex hierarchy of membership comes into play and it goes to the senior member.

In the cavernous, old-fashioned basement kitchen, reminding me of a scene from *Upstairs Downstairs*, scores of jars of freshly made marmalade were cooling.

"All the food is made here fresh, from scratch, by the chefs," the steward told me, "from bread, to jams and chutneys. We serve locally sourced meat and a lot of game in season." They still do silver service if members request it, but most dishes are now in the new style, plated up artistically.

Wine cellar

Crouching slightly, we made our way into the wine cellars. In the first room for 'high volume wines', I noticed cases and cases of Sauternes ordered in for the bicentenary. The wines are chosen by the Squadron's Wine Committee, some ready to drink, others bought en primeur to be kept until ready for drinking. The all-important port cellar is further down, in the deepest, coldest part of the building. Back up in the pantry, staff were polishing silver cutlery, which will no doubt be a Sisyphean task during the summer.

Is the club concerned that its traditional image may not appeal to potential younger members? I asked the commodore. He replied that the Squadron runs a racing programme every April for youngsters aged between 16 and 20 in 1/109s and there's a busy 1/70 team-racing schedule for around 80 Squadron Sailing Associates up to the age of 35.

Commodore Sharples is himself a keen sailor. "I started



sailing on a SCOD with my father, and then on an Excalibur 36," he told me. "We did plenty of RORC racing and Cowes Week every year." Aged 24, he took a sabbatical and set sail as skipper with three friends and his brother for Cape Town in a Gallant 53 in order to do the 1973 Cape to Rio Race. Since then he's competed in more than 40 Cowes Weeks, Fastnets, Newport-Bermudas and Swan Worlds.

He said it was "a great privilege" to be commodore in the Squadron's bicentenary year: "We have been planning for nearly two years so we are hopeful our events will be well-run and a great success, and everybody will have a good time."

Behind the America's Cup

Sharples will still be commodore in 2017, America's Cup year, and says it's "serendipity" for him that the competition will be in Bermuda. He has long-standing associations with the island, even keeping a J/80 there for racing, and visits as often as he can.

Obviously enthusiastic about the Squadron's America's Cup chances, he told me: "Our challenge, through our affiliated club – Royal Yacht Squadron Racing Ltd – with Ben Ainslie Racing as our team, is a tremendous opportunity for us to play our part in bringing the Cup back to Britain... We believe our member Sir Ben Ainslie has the best chance for a long time of winning the Cup. Our role, and mine as commodore, is to give Sir Ben all the support that we can."

So the Squadron remains an enigma: a private members' club still functioning with centuries-old traditions, yet a public-facing, dynamic organisation in the forefront of world racing. It has a reputation for being a bastion of high society, yet the members I know are not titled – one a surgeon, another in the arts.

July 2015 looks set to be a great celebration of this and all that's unique about this 200-year-old club, which is changing with the times while not compromising its standards and its history.

YW

The Bicentenary International Regatta

The Royal Yacht Squadron will be 200 years old on 1 June this year and in celebration the club has invited members of 25 clubs around the world for a week of racing from 25-31 July, in boats of all sizes from J/70 sportsboats to at least three of the mighty J Class classics.

A number of the bigger boats will arrive from Newport, USA, at the end of the Transatlantic Race 2015, organised by the Royal Yacht Squadron in conjunction with the New York YC, the Royal Ocean Racing Club and the Storm Trysail Club as part of the celebrations.

The three J Class yachts confirmed to date are *Lionheart*, *Ranger* and *Velsheda*. *Velsheda* was built by Camper & Nicholsons in the 1930s and a couple of decades ago was a regular sight on the Solent as a day charter boat.

Ranger was an aristocrat of a boat, owned by Harold Vanderbilt and winner of 32 of the 34 races she ever sailed, successfully defending the America's Cup in 1937. She was eventually scrapped and the new *Ranger* is a faithful replica.

Lionheart is a new J built to a similar set of plans to *Ranger* from the archives of designers Starling Burgess and Olin Stephens. She made her mark in J racing winning the Kings 100 Guineas Cup in Cowes in 2012. The appearance of the J Class at the Royal Yacht Squadron Bicentenary International Regatta will be a rare treat for Solent spectators.

The week of racing promises to be a lively set of events, including fleet racing under IRC and level rating plus team racing for younger sailors. Members of the 25 invited clubs who can't get their own boats to Cowes will still be able to compete thanks to the entire fleet of Sunsail Farr 40s being made available for charter, offering closely matched racing.

The highlight of the week is likely to be the Race Around the Island. Ashore, the social programme features parties and gatherings at the Castle and other special venues, culminating in a Grand Party at Osborne House on 30 July.



▲ Above: one of the cannon on the Platform. ▼ Below: members-only landing stage off the Squadron

