

On the trail of the Wight taste

After his exploration of the Isle of Wight's churches last year, **Norman Wright** takes the Taste Trail to sample its mix of maritime history and fine food

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

Louise Griffin in the fabulous farm shop at Bridlesford Lodge Farm



Fortifications of Old Portsmouth at the entrance to the ancient harbour

Right: A tranquil place to enjoy eating in the tea garden overlooked by the Quarr Abbey church



“The tables dotted around Quarr’s peaceful tea garden overlooked by the warm architecture of the church are a unique place to enjoy eating. You’ll also see red squirrels”

WITH HMS *Victory*’s masts in the background, the Wightlink ferry casts off and slowly moves past the ancient fortifications of Portsmouth, Gosport and Southsea and across the spot at the harbour mouth where *Mary Rose* was lost.

Starting a trip to the Isle of Wight feels like a journey through 800 years of naval history. Then a modern warship at anchor with its curious grey geometric, angled shape brings us back to the present as we head across a Solent

dotted with the white sails of yachts. Looking back as you pass Spitbank Fort, built to defend against Napoleon III in the 1860s, you can still see the masts in the historic dockyard and some more of the Royal Navy’s scant fleet. Dominating the view is the white sail-shaped Spinnaker Tower. It’s a vista to stir the excitement of travel.

The magic is working on the several parties of junior school children who are setting out on trips. They cluster by the rails on the viewing deck and bombard their teachers with questions.

Visiting the Isle of Wight is something special because of the short crossing and

the history. It’s only a small island but there is always something new to discover. The last time, we were in search of churches (*Choice*, January 2013); this time we were on the Taste Trail.

The sun picked out the beaches, headlands and the houses overlooking them the nearer we got to the terminal at Fishbourne, and it seemed like a pretty good way of enjoying this most traditional of British islands – sea, history, and good food. What more could you ask?

The first stop on our taste trail was close to the ferry terminal at the Benedictine Monastery, Quarr Abbey. A community of

Benedictine monks bought Quarr Abbey House on the site of a ruined abbey and built the splendid red brick Abbey Church and guest house in 1911. The monks, refugees from persecution in France, had arrived on the island in 1901.

Queen Victoria had been a frequent visitor to Quarr Abbey House, and her daughter, Princess Beatrice, had spent her honeymoon there following her marriage to Prince Henry of Battenburg.

During the First World War, the Guest House was used for the convalescence of wounded soldiers. Princess Beatrice came to visit them as governor of the Isle

of Wight. Robert Graves stayed there for a short time and recalls the fact in *Goodbye to All That*.

Quarr’s land is used to grow vegetables and fruit in an innovative scheme where local charities can cultivate their own patch to support their work.

Visitors can enjoy Quarr’s produce in their farm shop and tea garden. The tea garden also serves light meals – great food – but it is the setting that makes it even more special. The tables dotted around the peaceful garden overlooked by the warm architecture of the church are a unique place to enjoy eating. You will also see red squirrels.

One of the top dishes on offer is roast belly pork from the abbey’s own pigs, served with apples from its orchards. The pigs are kept free range in large enclosures, (www.quarrabbey.co.uk).

Rosemary Vineyard in Smallbrook



Happy pig at Quarr Abbey

◀ Lane, near Ryde, was planted in 1986 and covers 30 acres at almost 60ft above sea level. With its mostly south-facing aspect, the vineyard is ideally placed to benefit from the mild island climate.

The valley situation helps retain summer warmth and offers shelter from the south-westerly winds.

The vineyard produces red, white, sparkling and rosé wines as well as elderberry and elderflower wines and fruit liqueurs, several ciders and some excellent apple juice.

All its products are available in the vineyard shop and there's also a coffee shop and free 30-minute tours of the vineyard and winery at weekends and on Mondays and Tuesdays, tel: 01983 811084, website: (www.rosemaryvineyard.co.uk).

If beer is more your thing, try the cask ales from Yates Brewery in Newchurch. The micro-brewery was founded by David Yates, a former oil pipeline engineer, and is now run day-to-day by his son David.

You can sample the beer at various pubs including David senior's own local, the White Lion in Niton.

The New Inn at Shalfleet has a great reputation for its food as well as the traditional atmosphere of a country pub.

Shalfleet is good for a walk and a spot of bird-watching to get an appetite for a meal at the New Inn.

It's an easy, peaceful stroll down to the quaint old boatyard at Shalfleet Quay and back, affording fantastic views of the estuary (mud flats at low tide, river estuary



A cut above pub grub at the New Inn Shalfleet
Below: Some of Rosemary Vineyard's fruit wine

at high tide) and its bird life, tel: 01983 531314, website: (www.thenew-inn.co.uk).

The Taste Trail is based on traditional and home-grown produce and methods, and Calbourne water mill not far from Shalfleet goes back to medieval times. After hundreds of years, it is still producing various stoneground flours.

There are milling demonstrations, a small museum and boating as well as picnic areas.

The mill has a café which sells its flour, porridge and muesli in flavours that include Blissful Berry and Cheerful Cherry. The mill is open between Easter and early November from 10am to 5pm, tel: 01983 531227, website: (www.calbournwatermill.co.uk).

The Griffin family has been farming at Briddlesford Lodge at Wootton for four generations. Louise Griffin, her brother David and his wife Chris now run the farm, which their great-grandfather started



Some of Briddlesford Lodge Farm's pedigree Guernsey herd relaxing after milking



Farmer Jack's was one of the first farm shops on the island

in 1923. They have diversified into a café and farm shop selling a fabulous display of local produce and veal and unpasteurised milk, yoghurt and cream from their award-winning pedigree Guernsey herd, tel: 01983 884650, website: (briddlesfordlodgefarm.co.uk).

Farmer Jack's Farm Shop in Arreton Old Village is worth a visit just to see the incredible display of fruit vegetables, meat and deli products.

It's colourful and beautifully presented, with a staggering variety.

When the original shop opened in 2005, the aim of founding partners Ben Brown and Stuart Pierce was quite simple.

"We wanted to supply field-fresh fruit and vegetables from our own farms and provide an outlet for the best local produce from fellow farmers and food producers," says Ben.

Within five years, Farmer Jack's had moved to larger purpose-built premises in the village complex, trebling its size and making this the Isle of Wight's largest local food store.

Familiar names like Dunsbury lamb and Brownrigg poultry are available, and the Farmer Jack's team is also enthusiastic about pork from Combley Farm, just over Arreton Down. "It would be harder to find a shorter supply chain from farm to shop,"

says Stuart. It is open daily year-round, Monday to Saturday 9.30am to 6pm, Sunday 10am to 5pm, tel: 01983 527530, website: (www.farmerjacks.co.uk).

Colin Boswell has been growing garlic for 40 years and his 300-acre Garlic Farm near Newchurch is now one of the island's main tourist attractions.

Solent Wight, the original garlic grown by his mother in her Fifties kitchen garden and a long-lasting, hard variety with a strong flavour and bouquet, remains the Boswell favourite. It is also



Garlic growing in the fields at The Garlic Farm



Jenny Simmons of The Dairy Deli

“Colin Boswell has been growing garlic for 40 years and his 300-acre Garlic Farm near Newchurch is now one of the island’s main tourist attractions”

visit the Courtyard Café at Chessell Pottery Barns. The range of scones is baked almost in front of your eyes. The cream is local and the café makes most of its own jam.

To top that, the tea is served in teapots and on plates made in the pottery.

Set in the countryside of West Wight Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the outdoor courtyard tables are shaded by a mature willow tree, rustic tables are set by a warming log fire for days when the weather demands it, and cosy gallery seating overlooks the pottery shop.

Co-owner Louise Collins came to the pottery from a career in marketing with



A fabulous cream tea at Chessell Pottery's Courtyard Café

used to create the Garlic Farm's potent smoked garlic.

The farm sells 12 different local garlics, depending on the time of year. These include the giant elephant garlic and smoked garlic – as well as pickles, chutneys and relish, oak-smoked garlic butter and garlic bread made from locally

milled flour. The latest products are a garlic beer, brewed by Yates on the farm, and Garlic Farm pork scratchings.

The farm has a restaurant and various exhibitions as well as offering tours of the garlic fields, tel: 01983 865378, website: (www.thegarlicfarm.co.uk).

Sisters Louise Hart and Jenny Simmons opened The Dairy Deli in 2010 in the shop of a closing petrol filling station. It features Calbourne Classics' range of dairy produce from their mother Jill Cawood's 200-strong Three Gates Farm herd.

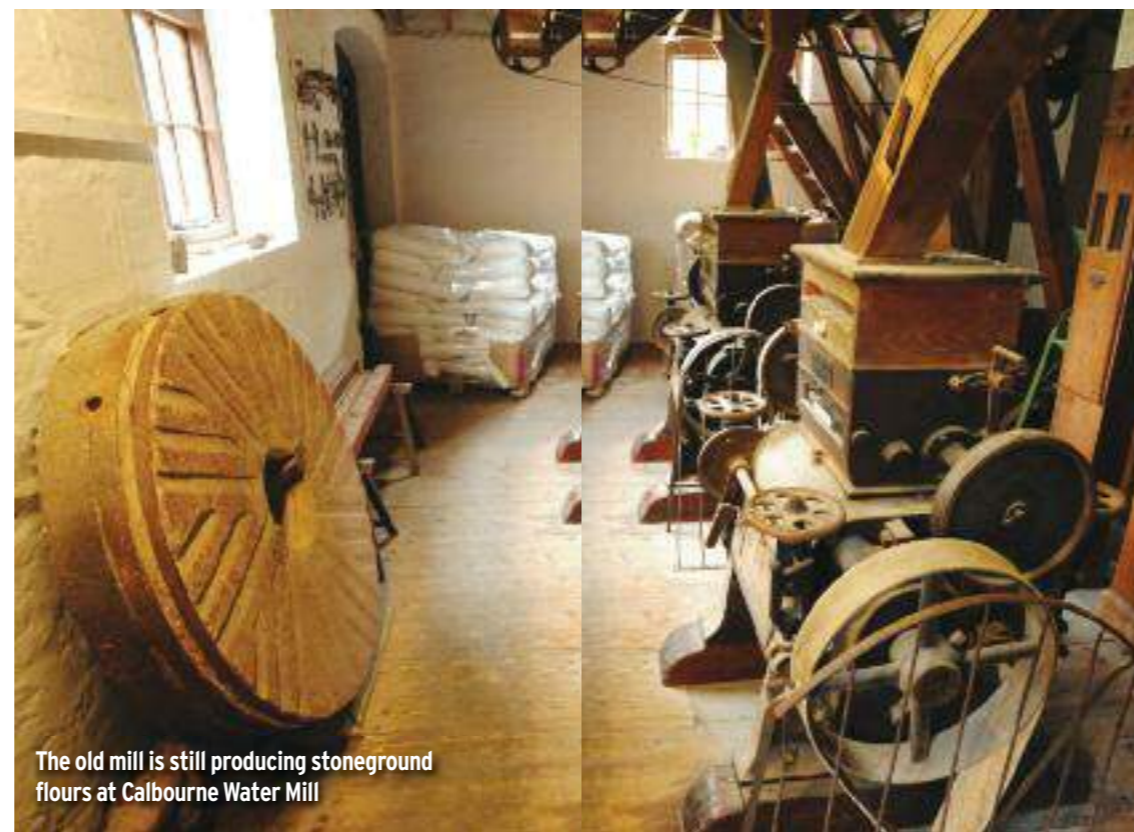
As well as hand-made cakes, cheesecakes and ice creams, they offer a wide range of deli produce, meat, fish, fruit, vegetables and local chutneys, too.

Louise and Jenny have since taken over the Real Island Food website and now deliver local food hampers to homes and holiday cottages island-wide every Friday and Saturday, tel: 01983 531557, websites: (www.calbourneclassics.co.uk) and (www.realislandfood.co.uk).

If you want an incredible cream tea,



Breads baked with flour from Calbourne Water Mill and on sale in their shop



The old mill is still producing stoneground flours at Calbourne Water Mill

no knowledge of ceramics or catering; neither did her partner.

They learned quickly and now produce their own range of tableware identified by a home-designed strawberry motif. Visitors, especially children, can paint their own designs on pottery and have it fired for collection in a couple of days.

The cream tea was fantastic – one of many highlights of enjoying food on the island. It is open Tuesday to Sunday 9.30am to 5.30pm, and Mondays on Bank Holidays and school holidays (closed January and February), tel: 01983 531248, website: (www.chessellpotterybarns.co.uk).

Those food highlights also include the

meal served at the beautiful old Seaview Hotel where we stayed during our visit. The seafront at this quaint old village with winding, narrow streets was perfect for a pre-dinner stroll. At breakfast time there were also several hardy souls taking a dip.

The hotel was old-fashioned quality with a beautiful modern menu. The restaurant is open seven nights a week from 6.30 to 9.30pm; lunch is served from noon to 2.30pm, tel: 01983 612711, website: (www.seaviewhotel.co.uk).

Chef Dan Maskell and his wife Carla, who runs the front of house, provided the top taste of our visit.

Dan is an accomplished chef, and the

intimate Dan's Kitchen at St Helens is simply superb. Again using local ingredients, especially fish, the standards of food and service are in the Michelin star class.

The atmosphere overlooking the green at St Helens is relaxed, with a mixture of locals and visitors enjoying brilliant cooking. It is open for dinner Tuesday to Saturday 6.30 to 9.15pm, lunch Wednesday to Saturday noon to 1.30pm, tel: 01983 872303, website: (www.danskitcheniow.com).

The Taste Trail is another great idea from Wightlink; its many other places to enjoy food are detailed in its booklet. Of course, the other reasons to visit this beautiful, tranquil island are still there while you indulge...

Passport to the Isle of Wight

Getting there

- We travelled to the Isle of Wight to take the Wight Taste Trail with Wightlink on its 45-minute car ferry service between Portsmouth and Fishbourne, tel: 0871 376 0013, website: (www.wightlink.co.uk)
- Car ferries also operate between Portsmouth and Lymington (40 minutes) and there is a passenger catamaran service from Portsmouth Harbour to Ryde Pier Head (about 22 minutes).

Where to stay

- We stayed at the Seaview Hotel and Restaurant, tel: 01983 612711, website: (www.seaviewhotel.co.uk). It is one of eight new Taste Trail Break options featured by Wightlink that link with its new Wight Taste Trail booklet, available free, tel: 0871 376 1000, website: (www.wightlink.co.uk/wighttastetrail). Two-night Wight Taste Trail breaks at the Seaview Hotel start from £155 per person, including accommodation with breakfast and return car ferry crossings from Portsmouth or Lymington.

Find out more

- See the websites: (www.visitisleofwight.co.uk), (www.iwight.com/visitors), (www.isleofwighttouristguide.com) and (www.isleofwightattractions.co.uk).



Painting a picture at the quaint seaside village of Seaview