

ENDURING VALUES

Discretion and a sense of style are the characteristics that have helped this royal club become a yachting legend. This year it is celebrating its bicentenary. The Club opened its doors to BOAT EXCLUSIVE for the first time.

Text Svante Domizlaff Photos YPS/Peter Neumann

Period view of "The Castle" clubhouse with members of the Squadron assembled at random. What is interesting is the bottom right corner. The man with the white cap is Kaiser Wilhelm II, to his left the Duke of York, later King George V, then his father, King Edward VII, Commodore of the R.Y.S., and finally Prince Arthur, the Duke of Connaught, son of Queen Victoria, and on the extreme right of the picture Admiral Freiherr von Senden-Bibran, Adjutant General to Kaiser Wilhelm II.

"The Castle" today, plus the R.Y.S.' "Jubilee Haven", inaugurated in 2006 by Prince Philip. The landing pier with steps to the left is reserved exclusively for use by the Royal Family.





The “platform”, a semi-open veranda looking onto the sea, is where the race management committee works. The white helm wheel

from “Victoria & Albert”, Queen Victoria’s state yacht, is repositied here along with a large number of yacht models and badges.

The Royal Yacht Squadron (R.Y.S.) has a lot in common with the British monarchy: people obviously know where it resides, for what it stands, and that it is very, very distinguished. They might show curiosity, respect, and even surprise upon discovering that anything like it still exists today. But when an invitation has been sent,

then even the staunchest republican will not wait to be asked twice. Guests are received in perfect elegance, but only rarely does someone catch a glimpse of the inner circles of this club.

As it happens the British Royal house and the R.Y.S. are closely affiliated. When the club was formed in a London tavern in 1815 by 42 gentlemen inter-

ested in yachting, it would be just two years before the first Royal Highness, the Prince Regent, later King George IV, joined and The Yacht Club was renamed the Royal Yacht Club.

During the summer the gentlemen regularly sailed on the Solent, the strait between the Isle of Wight and the southern coast of England. Portsmouth, the important naval port, lies just to the North of the same stretch of water.

“Hallowed ground” as territory

The annual regatta held off the shore of the Cowes seaside resort eventually developed into Cowes Week, the mother of all sailing events. With the initiation of the America’s Cup in 1851, the races of the royal and imperial schooners before the Great War, and the Admiral’s Cup, an offshore racing team-championship

during the 1970s and 1980s, the RYS brought more glamour and drama to Cowes than any other regatta that yachting has to offer. If there were such a thing as “hallowed ground” in yachting, then it is the territory of the R.Y.S. on the Solent, which features treacherous

sandbanks and fearsome and complex tidal currents, waiting to catch one out. In 1833 George IV was succeeded by William IV, who imparted the club’s modern name, the Royal Yacht Squadron. From here on all British monarchs have been connected to the club in one man-

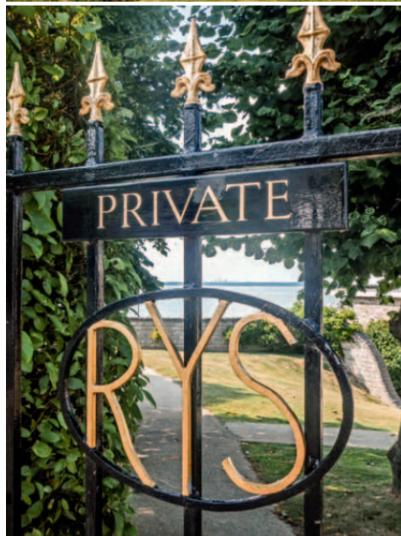
ner or another; among them Queen Victoria and also her dear, albeit wayward, German grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm II. The connection to the royal house continues today. Queen Elizabeth II acts as Patron of the R.Y.S. Her Prince Consort, Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, once an active



Other regatta weeks around the world offering similar drama and glamour are rare



“The pavillon orangery” was opened in 2000 by R.Y.S. Admiral, Prince Philip. Here there is space for larger events with a view over the Solent. Photos to the left: view of the R.Y.S. from the sea, view of a WW2 Japanese naval binoculars from the “platform”.



1829 members of the R.Y.S. are permitted to bear the official White Ensign, the British Royal Navy flag with a red St. George Cross on a white field, on the stern of their yachts. The club burgee was also modeled after it.

Former fort as a clubhouse

This honour was awarded in a time when the Royal Navy still traversed the seas by sail. It was the desire of both organisations to learn from one another. The first regatta yachts were originally service vessels: fast cutters, smuggler boats, and pilot schooners. The regatta sport inspired the innovation and the construction of new, nimble boats, which were of great interest to the military marine. During troubled times club members make their yachts available to the Navy. This has been tradition since the Crimean War in 1856. During the Second World War the R.Y.S. consented to yielding the clubhouse to the British Admiralty.

Since 1855 the R.Y.S. has resided in a small castle in Cowes on the west bank of the Medina River where it flows into the Solent. The clubhouse, a former fortress dating back to 1539, is officially called The Castle.

Beyond the towers of the platform, beneath a striped awning, resides the race management. It has access to a battery of 23 brass canons, which sit

The lawn where receptions are held, with a view of the Clubhouse from the "pavilion". Pimm's or G&T anyone? A locked side entrance and the royal landing pier.

Dragon and offshore sailor himself, served as Commodore and is now the Admiral (from the Arabic: amir al-bahr, Commander of the Sea).

This is history for the club records but there are also stories that tug at the heart. Historically there has existed an especially close bond between the R.Y.S. and the Royal Navy and Admiral Sir Thomas Hardy, a member of both institu-

tions, is remembered today as "Nelson's Hardy" and commander of Lord Nelson's flagship "H.M.S. Victory" in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The maritime hero lay dying in Hardy's arms, mortally wounded by a musket bullet. Nelson's last words were entrusted to his captain and dedicated to his homeland: "Kiss me, Hardy...God and my country." It does not get any more epic than this. Since



Maritime-theme paintings in the Clubhouse: "Falcon" belonging to the first Club Commodore, Lord Yarborough, a R.Y.S. racing cutter flying the White Ensign; and Lord Belfast's "Waterwitch". In the mid-19th century yachts resembled windjammers.



R.Y.S. Admirals' gallery in the members' dining room (t.) with King George V, Prince Philip and King Edward VII; beneath that on the left the entrance hall, dominated by a painting showing the surrender of the German fleet in 1918, and a picture of the schooner "America". The right-hand photo shows the members' dining room with the folded dining table, the "Jupe patent table".

upon the breastwork along the water and announce the start of a race with a thunderous clap. The signal mast in the middle once decorated the royal yacht "Bloodhound" from 1928. Nothing stands here, which is not here by right.

A suit and tie are de rigueur

The clubhouse is, in spite of the cannons and towers, more home than castle. The appearance of a country house marks the inside of the living quarters. There is no room here for large gatherings, although

an addition was built to The Castle in 1964. The demolition of the twin tower at East Cowes on the opposite shoreline rendered historical stonework which was in turn repurposed for the addition.

A large enough space was finally created in 2000 when a bright pavilion, a sort of orangery, was built on a lawn adjacent to the RYS. Members can enjoy their lunch in relaxed sailing attire or simply enjoy the splendid view of the sea from higher ground. But one should not assume that it is all laid-back in the

pavilion. Table cloths are ironed after being placed on the tables and the service staff employ rulers in order to guarantee absolute precision of place settings.

This is old school form and style. Blazers and ties are required for entry to The Castle. Leather boat shoes are tolerated, especially those with some visible wear, which are considered the sign of a true yachtsman. The same goes for the washed-out baggy red cotton pants, the so-called "Cowes trousers,"



The library, stocked with maritime books, many works by Churchill and a TV, is a place to withdraw to and contemplate the world.

which are an iconic piece of England's understated yachting fashion.

One enters the club through the entrance hall. Whoever is not acquainted with English style will incorrectly perceive the clubhouse as a museum. But whatever guests recognize as museum-like, club members treasure as part of their natural habitat, in which they live and feel comfortable, regardless of how saturated it is with history, or how valuable or simply how beautiful it may be. Thankfully, every room of the clubhouse displays a small portfolio, in which the origins of the items of interest are thoroughly explained: paintings, trophies, models, maritime treasures. Every room bears its own name, each of which alludes to the space's special meaning. The entrance hall is dominated by an oil

painting of the Squadron's first admiral, King William IV, a seascape of the yacht "America", and a patriotic oil painting depicting British battleships as they escort the defeated German High Seas Fleet to Scapa Flow for internment in 1918. Another real treasure kept in a brass frame: a handwritten letter from Lord Nelson, composed just two months before his death.

Treasures on the walls

Through the hall one reaches the platform with a semi-circle of towers, where the Race Management works beneath the awning, decorated with binoculars and signal charts, and with direct access to the cannons atop the breastwork. Models of well-known club yachts decorate the rear stone wall of the platform: the

tiller of the royal cutter "Bloodhound", lists written in golden letters of the victors of well-known regattas and the white wheel of Queen Victoria's bygone private yacht "Victoria & Albert", which once called Cowes home.

Among the most important common rooms is the library, which features a fireplace framed by historic paintings of significant yachts and their owners. Shelves filled with maritime books and – naturally – the works by Nobel laureate Winston Churchill, line the linden green wallpapered walls.

The soft pink morning room is furnished with a secretary and armchairs cozied up around another fireplace. Above it hangs a painting portraying the five yachts of Vice-Commodore Lord Belfast (1825-1934). Here, too, rests a letter penned by Lord Nelson.

The members' dining room holds a special meaning in the clubhouse. A round mahogany table, which opens up

Non-Englishmen will feel like they are in a museum when entering many of the rooms



In the clubhouse's hotel facilities there is a total of 15 rooms for members and their guests, including the Commodore's room, the finest bedroom in the house. The ladies drawing room, with blue seating, is a great place to enjoy an afternoon cup of Earl Grey.

ROYAL YACHT SQUADRON



The morning room, finished in pink, is dominated by oil paintings depicting Vice-Commodore Lord Belfast's five yachts. To the right of the door is a framed original letter written by Admiral Nelson. The polished wood furniture can be regarded as typically English.

like a flower using cleverly employed technology and additional leaves, stands in the middle of the gold-flooded room. Two monarchs, George IV and Edward VII, cast their gaze from the walls. They invite Prince Philip, to join their ranks. A large oil painting, depicting the launch of

the squadron rally of 31 R.Y.S. yachts to Cherbourg in 1831, is featured on the broad side of the room.

The balcony, a sort of patio, is suitable for tea time or a gin and tonic with a view. A tribe of twenty-four full-time employees makes up the staff which

sees to the welfare of the club members. During peak seasons like Cowes Week upwards of sixty temporary employees are added to the schedule. A fleet of six J80 keel boats is a recent addition, bought together with the Royal Thames Yacht Club, to encourage the development of team racing. These are deployed year-round, in the winter on the Queen Mary Reservoir, an artificial lake west of London, and in the summer in Cowes.

535 regular members

Membership is only extended to persons of at least twenty-one years of age. The number of regular club members rests at a constant 535. There are an additional 20 honorary members, 70 members from the Royal Navy, 35 persons, who are ex officio members based on their special status and another 500 so-called associate members, who do not hold full membership status. The R.Y.S. fosters ties to two partner clubs, the New York Yacht Club and the Yacht Club Costa Smeralda in Porto Cervo, Sardinia. So how does one become a fully-fledged member? Since one cannot submit an



Letters written by Lord Nelson, one shortly before he died, adorn the R.Y.S. walls



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“Meteor III’s” racing ensign: Skipper Charlie Barr was given it by Kaiser Wilhelm II.



Royal Yacht Squadron

The Castle, Cowes,
Isle of Wight, PO31 7QT, UK
Tel. +44(0)1983292191 www.rys.org.uk

- 1815 Founded as The Yacht Club in a London tavern
- 1833 Became the Royal Yacht Squadron by command of King William IV
- 6. July 1856 R.Y.S. pennant first raised at “The Castle” clubhouse in Cowes
- 1851 Establishment of the America’s Cup with a regatta around the Isle of Wight
- 2015 R.Y.S. bicentenary, including a sailing event off Cowes

application a potential candidate can only hope to be “invited.” Five members must support a nomination. The admission process extends over the course of at least two years. Since 2014 ladies are eligible to become members. In England there is no shortage of formidable ladies, yes, even knighted dames, who are known for their accomplishments in yachting. Yet due to

the long admission process, we may not expect to see any female members before 2016. The Royal Yacht Squadron remains true to its noble principles, even in its 200th year of existence. And yet the club has also known change; there are only a few Royal houses left, which can name any active sailors among their ranks. The royal yacht “Britannia”, once a regular

in Cowes, has long since gone out of commission. Only the royal landing stage of the R.Y.S. serves as a reminder of those times. Today’s civilian, although glamorous, maxi yachts are more likely to commute between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean than dare a detour into brittle English waters.

The R.Y.S. closed itself off from the professionalisation of the sport of yachting for good reason, and has in part shifted out of the focus of the ever more commercialised yacht sport. The club has allowed a slow, careful opening of the club, not only towards women, but also other general yachting interests. When an Olympic star such as Sir Ben Ainslie (4X gold, 1X silver) holds a sailing seminar for the youth, then he is certainly invited to do so on the platform of the R.Y.S. The latest British challenge for the America’s Cup, led by the same Sir Ben, has come from the R.Y.S.

J-Fleet to mark bicentenary

Whenever the Royal Yacht Squadron pronounces a regatta invitation, as on the occasion of the 150th Jubilee of the America’s Cup in 2001, Cowes transforms into the essence of what it has always been: the epicenter of yachting. In the summer of 2015, the J-boats, historically the largest yacht race class in the world, are invited to celebrate of the 200th anniversary of the club. You can be sure that not one of these boats is going to miss this event.

Legend here, history there; the R.Y.S. is a club that conveys enduring values. Its members are bonded by their mutual passion for being out on the open water and not because they are paid to do so. For them yachting is not a pastime but a way of life. Within their club, they have been able to create a social atmosphere that preserves and fosters their unique style. It is simply enviable.



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