

THE ISLE OF
FRESHWATER

*Some
Historical
Notes*

Issued by the
FRESHWATER PARISH COUNCIL

PRICE ONE SHILLING

Introduction

These pages have been gathered together to give a picture, if possible, of Freshwater past (which formerly included what is now the separate Parish of Totland), and to lead the reader into Freshwater present and future—the future which lies before us as we hopefully open our new hall. We look back with pride, in our estimation of the value of the contribution of this place and people to past history, and boldly forward in hope for the generations to come; generations who will live and work here, as we have done, in this pleasant homeland bounded by the Yar and the encircling sea.

If you climb “the ridge of noble Down,” as the Laureate lovingly called it, and stand by the granite cross to Tennyson’s memory (placed where stood the old warning beacon to mariners) you may rejoice as he did. The Poet loved to come to this spot in all weathers, to enjoy the wonderful panorama which lies below, sometimes referred to as “The Isle of Freshwater.”

There lie the five ancient districts of Norton, Sutton, Easton, Weston, and Middleton, with the open greens of School, Pound, and Norton. Hidden away in the distance are the old footpath of Long Halves, Weston Brayboeuf with its memories of the Conqueror, Camp Road, which constantly reminds us of the threat of Napoleon, and, immediately below, spread like a tapestry, lie the fields of Farringford, still bearing the names the monks gave them in the twelfth century, “Friar’s Pit,” “Clerks Hill,” “St. George,” and “Maiden’s Croft.”

Leave the great High Down, make your way through the village, and up Hooke Hill. Spare a thought to the wonder scientist with the crooked back, Robert Hooke, inventor of the microscope and clock escapement movement, who was born here in the 17th century. The road leads to the Norman Church of All Saints, where Freshwater folk have worshipped for 800 years. Before you pass through the lych gate stand in what must surely be one of the oldest parts of Freshwater, Church Place, and remember the men and women who through the centuries made their homes here, lived their lives, planted their seed, harvested their crops, and at the end of their day lay down to rest. They all played their part in making Freshwater. We salute them!

Early History

In Freshwater, as elsewhere on the Island, prehistoric men have left traces of their presence which the archaeologist can interpret. Otherwise, we know little about them until shortly before the start of the Christian era, when some Belgae, the Durotriges, a Celtic-speaking people from the Continent (whose tribal headquarters was at Maiden Castle in Dorset), settled here. Then came the Romans. As, however, we have found no indication of any Roman military establishment in Freshwater, they may have left the native Britons in comparative peace so long as they paid their taxes. Contemporary implements and coins have been found, and there survive two Romano-British pottery kilns in full view by the roadside on Moon's Hill, just over a quarter of a mile east of the High Down Inn.

Elsewhere in England modern place-names reveal traces of the old British speech, particularly in the names of hills and rivers, but such is not the case in Freshwater. The complete absence of Celtic elements in our place-names may be explained by the reported ruthlessness, on occasion, of the subsequent Anglo-Saxon conquerors. One account says that they (the Jutes) "slew the few British inhabitants of the Island, as many as they found therein, at a place which is called Wihtgaraburh (modern Carisbrooke) for the rest of the natives of that Island had either been killed already or had fled into exile."

This apparently took place late in the fifth century A.D. or early in the sixth. 130-150 years later the Jutish settlers were overcome in their turn by the Saxons from Wessex, and although the Danes raided the Island on various occasions in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, they did not settle here as they did on the east coast of England, and Freshwater remained in English control until the Norman conquest.

Alarms and Excursions

For 3000 years or more the Isle of Wight has been the objective, from time to time, of raiders and invaders, and during the period of recorded history at least, people in the Freshwater peninsula have played an important part in watching for the approach of enemy fleets and raising the alarm. The modern names "Sconce Point," "Round Tower Point," "Warden Point," and "Totland," on the west coast, all point to the existence of past look-out places, and documents of 1785 and 1805 refer to the Watch House near Freshwater Bay. It is worthy of note that these sites were used for exactly the same purpose in both World Wars.

The Island was harried in the ninth to eleventh centuries by the Danes and in the Middle Ages by the French. Our records of contemporary watch and alarm systems are scanty, but in 1324 there were beacons at Sconce Point, then called Sharpenode, and on Headon Hill. In the reign of Henry VIII, when considerable work was done on the defences of the Island, Richard Worsley, its Captain, built a watch tower at what came to be called Round Tower Point, opposite Hurst Castle and near the present Cliff End Fort. By the time of Elizabeth I Worsley's Tower had fallen into decay, and in 1588 (when the Spanish Armada was imminent) Sir George Carey built a sconce (a small fort) of earth and turf at Sharpenode, about half a mile nearer Yarmouth, and Sharpenode came to be called Sconce Point. It is on record that the labourers employed on the work enjoyed the wage of eightpence a day.

In 1638 there was a ward and watch of two men each on "Freshwater Down," which has been identified as Headon Hill. While both "ward" and "watch" comprised the duties of a sentinel, the former was carried out by day, the latter at night. The importance of Freshwater in this "early warning system" was revealed by the fact that it was the only point in the Island, out of 19 such, where two men were on watch day and night.

In 1629 certain influential residents of the Island petitioned the Government to allow money for repair of their forts, and made a proposal for making the peninsula of Freshwater a place of retreat for the inhabitants of the Island, with their cattle, upon any invasion which they could not withstand, and Yarmouth "for the more considerable inhabitants." Freshwater was to be insulated by cutting through the neck of land at Freshwater Gate and the passage to be secured with drawbridges and half-moons, but nothing came of this proposal.

It is easy to see why it was made. There was a castle at Yarmouth, and from Sconce Point, where the cliffs start, they are unbroken, except for a few easily defensible chines, right round the west and south of the peninsula to Freshwater Gate. With these defences and the River Yar to protect them the refugees would feel more secure than in more exposed parts of the Island further east.

Did you know that Lot's wife was a native of the Freshwater peninsula? She was one of the Needles in the form of a stone pillar 100-120 feet high, brought down by the sea in 1764, and a contemporary report said that the vibration was felt at Southampton.

The Parish Church of All Saints, Freshwater

If you are interested in history a visit to our beautiful Parish Church will be well worth while.

The oldest part of the Church, believed built in the 11th century, is the South East Chapel. The present nave with Norman pillars and arches is 12th century. Major restoration and the addition of the North and South aisles took place in 1875 at an estimated cost of £2750.

All Saints Church was presented to the Norman Abbey of Lyra by William Fitz-Osborne, then sequestrated by Edward III; restored to the Abbey of Lyra by Henry IV. It changed hands on several occasions until 1623 when the advowson was conferred on St. John's College, Cambridge. In recent years the Choristers of St. John's have visited us, and the beautiful music of their voices blending with the tones of the recently rebuilt organ was a musical feast that will long be remembered.

The church clock chimes were composed by Sir John Stainer, and are known as the Tennyson chimes.

The paved path on the north side of the church is itself a history in stone as many of the old gravestones are still legible.

Inside the church are many interesting memorials. The glass in the window in the South aisle is a reproduction of a picture by the artist Watts. The Compton Brasses are interesting history.

Robert Hooke, the famous 17th century scientist, was born in Freshwater and his christening is recorded in the church registers in the year 1635. The original registers dating back to Queen Elizabeth I are well preserved. They contain such items as:—

“Collected in the Parish of Freshwater on Wensday 2 of Agast being a fast day for the sick of the Plague fourteen shillings six pence.”

“Collected in the Parish of Freshwater on Sunday October the 6 day of 1667 for the inhabitants of our borough of Bradnich in our County of Devon Five shillings and eight pence.”

Entries in the registers for the period about 1813 show the presence of the Brunswick Troops that were stationed at Colwell Barracks.

Various entries record the burials of bodies of unknown people washed up by the sea at Freshwater Gate.

Some of the names recorded give us food for thought. Did Brambell give his name to what is now known as Brambles Chine?

There are two daughter churches in the parish, St. Agnes at Freshwater Bay and St. Andrew at Norton. Both of these are of this century, but St. Agnes is unique in being thatched and was built of stone, much of which came from an old farm building at Hooke Hill. The date stone 1694 was used in the building of the church and gives rise to the belief that this beautiful little church is much older than the present century.

St. Andrew at Norton started with a gift of land in 1875, and after use as a school for some years was enlarged and dedicated in 1913 by the Bishop of Southampton.

The Parish Church of Totland was erected in 1875.

Other Churches

The present Roman Catholic Church was erected in 1923. Prior to this date services were held in the chapel at Weston Manor.

We find no records of local nonconformity until in Freshwater the early Methodists met in the cottage of a Mrs. Parkes. In 1824 a chapel was built at School Green on land given by a Mr. Mitchell of Norton. In 1861 this was enlarged and rebuilt and served until 1958, when it was pronounced unsafe and demolished. A new hall now stands on the site.

Local Baptists met in a united communion embracing the members at Wellow and Yarmouth. In 1835 the local members erected their own chapel, "Ebenezer" at Colwell.

Due to his removal from Rookley to Norton Green in 1862 a Mr. Chiverton busied himself in forming a Bible Christian (Methodist) cause there. This served a needy area, including many men working at Golden Hill Fort. Early converts included the Roberts family, one of whom served the Salvation Army with distinction. Later, in 1866, on land given by Mr. Merwood, a Chapel was erected which served "the Green" for many years.

During the ministry of Rev. W. R. K. Baulkwill at Quay Street, Newport (President of Conference 1904), a commodious church was built in the Avenue at Totland in memory of Mary Toms and William Bailey, Bible Christian missionary preachers in the Isle of Wight. Since Methodist Union in 1932 there has been increasing liaison between the members of this church and that at School Green (ex-Wesleyan), and in 1958 the two memberships merged.

The Congregationalists commenced to meet at a cottage in Blackbridge in 1882, then in the Good Templars' Hall in Victoria Road, and later, encouraged by Rev. R. Allen Davies and the Ventnor Church, built in Guyers Road in 1884. The stone used was the last quarried from Lacey's Farm, Totland. The pulpit, still in use, came from the Newport church and is the one used by Rev. Thomas Binney (author of the well-known hymn "Eternal Light", which he wrote during his ministry there).

Meetings of the Brethren were first held at Hillside Cottage, Blackbridge, afterwards at High Street, and later at a hall built in Middleton.

In 1394 a writ was issued against the Rector of Freshwater for smuggling wool. In the words of a perhaps contemporary poet :—

*De Rector of Freshwater (sad to relate),
Was dogg'd and collared at De Redde Lionne Inne.
A Matter of Conflicte betwixte Churche and State,
He was smuggled in smuggled woolle nexte-De-Skinne.*

*He attended De Courte at Tenne of De Clocke,
And began to intone a Piece of Liturgie.
This time it was not for De Sake of De Flocke,
But that he might claim benefitte of Clergie.*

*"Onlie wool-gathering," he said to De Warders,
And then, pulling woolle o'er De Justices' eyes,
"This holie suit doth not suit Holie Orders;
Respecte for De Clothe is a word to De wise."*

In 1297 Jacob Balbe and Walter de Whitlok paid two shillings to build one boat and one ship on the King's land in Freshwater.

Charles I passed through Freshwater on his way to London as a prisoner. On 30th November, 1648, he was driven by coach from Carisbrooke to a point on the coast near the present Cliff End fort, whence he sailed across to Hurst Castle. Two months later he was beheaded.

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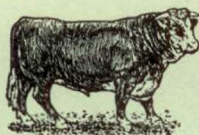
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On 20th May, 1736, the body of Samuel Baldwyn of Lymington was buried at sea in Scratchell's Bay "sans cérémonie." He provided for this in his will because he had heard his wife threaten to dance over his grave.

Frenchman's Hole, a cave under Tennyson Down, is so called because a fugitive Frenchman once concealed himself in it and was starved to death. In nearby Lord Holmes' Parlour and Cellar, it is said, Admiral Sir Robert Holmes entertained his guests in the one cave and kept his wines in the other.

In Worsley's "History of the Isle of Wight," published in 1781, it is recorded that, speaking of the cliffs between Freshwater Bay and the Needles, "the country people take the birds that harbour in these rocks, by the perilous expedient of descending by ropes fixed to iron crows, driven into the ground; thus suspended they, with sticks, beat down the birds as they fly out of their holes; a dozen birds generally yield one pound weight of soft feathers, for which the merchants give eightpence; the carcasses are bought by the fishermen at sixpence per dozen, for the purpose of baiting their crab-pots."

Worsley also records that "a fine white sort (of sand) is found at Freshwater, superior to any in Great Britain, for the glass and porcelain manufactories; great quantities of it are shipped off for London, Bristol, and Worcester." This sand was transported from Alum Bay, where it was dug, to the Sand House in Yarmouth Harbour, now used as a boatyard. From there it was shipped to the mainland. The trade came to an end in 1851 when sand from France was found to be superior, and replaced ours.

Early last century, in the reign of George III, German troops, from a Brunswick regiment, were stationed at Colwell barracks, and a number of them married Island girls. There is a local tradition that some of the older houses in Camp Road were occupied by their officers.

Local Place-Names

The Five Tuns. Although local, this is not "the local." An Old English word for a farm was *tun* and in modern place names this has usually become "ton." 1000-1500 years ago a common way of distinguishing neighbouring *tuns* was by the points of the compass. Thus Norton was the northern *tun*, Sutton the southern one, and there were also Easton, Weston, and Middleton. Worsley, in his history of the Island (1781) tells us that the Parish of Freshwater contained all five. Sutton has since disappeared from the map, but the other four remain.

Afton was the farm of Æffa, who, no doubt, was one of the early Saxon settlers here. Centuries later when, perhaps, the meaning of the name had been forgotten, the owners of the manor took their surname from it. There is a record of two grants made by Robert de Affeton and William de Afton to the Abbey of Lyra, of the tithes of their fisheries.

Alum Bay takes its name from the alum found there. In 1561 Richard Worsley, Captain of the Island, obtained a warrant from Queen Elizabeth I to search there for "Oure of Alume."

Colwell. This name has hardly altered at all during the last 500 years and means "the cool well," referring to one of the cold springs which gush out of the rocks there. To-day we associate a "well" with a hole in the ground from which we draw or pump water, but originally the word was commonly used of a spring.

Compton means "the farm in the valley." Anyone who has looked down at the present farm from the higher ground about it will realise how appropriate this description is.

Freshwater means exactly what it says. Apart from variations of spelling from time to time, it has remained unaltered since it was recorded in Domesday Book.

"Freshwater" was originally the name of the River Yar, and as late as the 18th century the river at the Yarmouth end was called Freshwater Lake.

At high tide the sea water reaches to the Causeway (below the Parish Church), so it is probable that the name refers to one of the river's arms that meet in the marshes to the south-east of the former railway station.

When the name came to be applied to the habitation which formed the nucleus of the present village is not known, but it was certainly more than 900 years ago. From time to time the name "Freshwater Isle" has been applied to the whole of the peninsula west of the River Yar.

Freshwater Gate. Here "gate" is not used in its modern sense, but as meaning "a gap in the hills," in this case between Afton and Tennyson Downs.

Golden Hill was not so named because of the gorse that grows on its slopes. Early spellings indicate that "Golden" is from two Old English words which give the meaning of "land on a hill which was subject to some sort of special payment or tax." As with Headdon Hill we have the meaning of "hill" occurring twice in the modern name.

Headdon Hill. "Headdon" is from two words which, in Old English, meant "heather" and "hill." "Hill" in the name is a modern addition, and when we speak of "Headdon Hill" we are really saying "the heather-clad hill hill."

Totland means "the look-out land." During the middle ages (and probably earlier) a more or less constant watch was kept here for the approach of hostile forces from the sea.

Warden Point. Here "Warden" is from two Old English words and means "watch hill." Linking this with Sconce Point, Round Tower Point, Totland, and Headdon Hill, we have a clear picture of how important the west coast of the peninsula was in the "early warning" systems of olden times.

Wilmington. Our earliest record of this name is in Domesday Book, but it probably dates from several hundred years earlier and may be one of the oldest place-names in the Island. Because we have no really early spellings we cannot be sure of its meaning, but the original elements appear to have been a personal name (Wighelm or Wilhelm), *ing*, an Anglo-Saxon suffix meaning "the son(s) of" or "the people of" and *ham(m)*, either a homestead or a river meadow. The nearest we can get to the meaning of the name therefore is that it was the homestead or river meadow of Wighelm's or Wilhelm's people.

River Yar. This name is an example of "back formation," which happens when a river is named from a town on its banks, and is not, as one might expect, the older name giving rise to the name of the town. Yarmouth got its name sometime during the 500 years before the Norman conquest and means "the muddy estuary or harbour," while the earlier name of the river was the Freshwater. In more recent times, when the original significance of "Yarmouth" had been forgotten, the river came to be called by its present name, no doubt because "Yarmouth" was, excusably, interpreted literally.

Before the Yar Bridge was opened in 1863 travel between Norton and Yarmouth was by ferry, and Captain Cole, in his history of Yarmouth, records that one of the last of the ferrymen, Henry Salter, is said to have fixed his own fees as "a penny for a working man, but sixpence for a gentleman," the latter being one who wore a white collar. A shelter on the Norton sands, whose walls still stand, was built by Sir Andrew Snape Hammond for the benefit of people waiting for the ferry.

In 1898 Marconi successfully transmitted wireless telegraphy signals between Alum Bay and the mainland and ships at sea, and his signal mast at Alum Bay was on the hotel lawn. It is reported that when the hotel proprietor wanted to increase the rental for such use of the lawn Marconi moved his apparatus to Niton.

The first aeroplane to land in the Island came down near the Tennyson Memorial Cross on 16th July, 1910. It was piloted in a race round the Needles during the Bournemouth flying week by the late Robert Loraine, the actor, who lost his way in a thunderstorm and was lucky not to go down in the Channel. A glimpse of the memorial through a rift in the clouds enabled him to make an emergency landing safely, and he flew his Farman biplane back three days later.

The first anti-aircraft gun was tested at the Needles Battery in December, 1913. Its special high angle mounting was designed by the staff of the School of Gunnery at Golden Hill, and the gun, a four-inch piece, was remarkably successful. The test was made by firing at box kites towed by a destroyer at a height of about 1000 feet.

I.W. County Press

1519-8-61
