



Cowes Heritage

A voluntary group dedicated to recording and exhibiting the history of Cowes, Isle of Wight

PRESS RELEASE

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Exhibition about Northwood House and the Ward Family

An opportune reminder of the fascinating history of one of the Isle of Wight's best known historic Listed houses is being provided by Cowes Heritage, with their latest major exhibition concerning Northwood House and its long association with the once highly influential Ward family.

Opening to the public on Saturday 23 October for three weeks, the exhibition is, appropriately, being held at Northwood House through the kind permission of the trustees, recently given the challenging task of running the house and beautiful park by the Isle of Wight Council.

"We want this exhibition to serve as a reminder to Isle of Wight people just how important it is that this house and park are preserved for future generations, despite the present economic difficulties," said Cowes Heritage chairman John Groves. "Hopefully our various displays will shed light on the many interesting aspects of the story of the house and park, and the huge role the Ward family played in the life of the Island in bygone times."

The exhibition relates how a London merchant, George Ward, was encouraged to move to Cowes in the late 18th century by William Arnold, the Isle of Wight's Collector of Excise. George Ward duly acquired Bellevue and some surrounding land.

Over the years he acquired many other properties, both in Cowes and all the way to West Wight. Eventually his acquisitions amounted to over 5,000 acres including, it is said, four-fifths of Cowes (including the Fountain Hotel), and many tenanted farms and smallholdings. Members of Cowes Heritage have trawled through old records to tell the story of some of the homes involved.

Also recalled is that in keeping with his Lord of the Manor lifestyle, George Ward created a near-mile long grand drive to his home, leading all the way from what was then the boundary of Northwood Park.

Following George Ward's death in 1829 his heir, George Henry Ward, decided to build a new house on the site of Bellevue. The architectural practice of John Nash drew up the plans, and Northwood House was finished in 1841.

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George Henry Ward died in 1849 and in a subsequent auction of effects Queen Victoria purchased an imposing marble statue of an Egyptian figure, still a feature of Osborne House. Next to inherit Northwood House was Edmund Granville Ward who rather than continue to live in the property decided to acquire for his home Egypt House on Cowes seafront.

Never again was Northwood House to be occupied by a Ward, although it remained in the family until 1929, during which time it had several uses, including as an academy 'for sons of noblemen', a nunnery, and a First World War auxiliary Red Cross hospital . Then in 1929 it was gifted '*to the town of Cowes as municipal buildings and public park*' - the donation being made by Captain Herbert Joseph Ward who was to become chairman of the Isle of Wight Council from 1956 to 1967.

Not forgotten in the displays is the fact that the Wards, following their conversion in the 19th century, were a leading Roman Catholic family. Besides leaving many properties to various Catholic institutions they paid for the construction of St Saviours RC Church at Totland, not far from Weston Manor, which William George Ward had built in 1871.

A huge number of photographs of Northwood House include those of the richly ornate decor of the public rooms, exquisitely painted ceiling portraits of famous people of antiquity, and some of its 36 all-different marble fireplaces.. There are also many photographs of Weston Manor, including its fine chapel. Most of the pictures were taken by Cowes Heritage member Jim Green.

Being launched at the exhibition is a book by Cowes Heritage member Angela McMurtry, about the history of the main piers in Cowes Harbour, including those built off the Parade. Reference was also made to George Ward who, together with a Southampton man, started the first Southampton-Cowes steam packet service in 1820.

The exhibition is open every day, 10 am - 4 pm, from Saturday 23 October to Sunday 14 November. Entry is via the Rotunda entrance, off Ward Avenue, and admission is free.