

Welcome to Cowes' Histree Trail

The Cascading Canopies Histree Trail is 2.8km (1.75 miles) long. The trail begins and ends at the Plane Tree beside Park Road car park. This trail is an easy, accessible walk, following mostly street trees and hard surfaces throughout. There is one short, steep incline with some steps to ascend.

Getting There

Bus: 1, 28 and 27 to Park Road. Ferry: Red Funnel Redjet ferry terminal is on the Esplanade. Car: There is pay and display car park in Park Road, and several on the Esplanade and in the town.

Follow the text and use the map to explore the Cascading Canopies Histree Trail. Discover the historic parkland of Northwood House at the heart of the town, visit no less than five different species of oak, sit underneath an umbrella tree and even find a tree with a ghostly tale...

The Cascading Canopies Histree Trail begins beneath a towering **London Plane** tree on Park Road **(1)**. This is the tallest of all the **London Plane** trees in Cowes and would have originally been planted to mark the eastern boundary of the grounds of Northwood House. The **London Plane** is commonly found in urban parks and gardens throughout the UK. Look out for its peeling bark which sometimes sheds in flakes to reveal a smooth underlying layer, producing a camouflage-style pattern. Its leaves are star-shaped and its spiky, round suspended fruits decorate the branches.

Make your way downhill towards the steps and climb them to join the pathway through the raised grassy area. To your left once stood

Northwood House's kitchen garden, established in 1844. Peaches and grapes were grown in ornate glass houses within the walled garden. A section of the northern wall was constructed of Bembridge limestone and survives to its full height (although recently rebuilt in places). The last survivors of the kitchen garden - a group of **Fig** trees - grow against its south face within private grounds.

Follow the path to your right which runs along the front of the church. Just before meeting the road, turn to view Cowes and scan the horizon for the tallest tree - a **Cedar**, 26 metres high. This tree is iconic not only to the people of Cowes and East Cowes, but also to seafarers who always feel they are 'home' when they see it from The Solent. Turn left into the churchyard of St. Mary's.

There has been a church on this site since 1657, look out for some headstones with inscriptions dating from this period. Also here is the grave of John Sutton, killed by the sword in the park in 1815 following a quarrel in the local inn - the last victim of the final duel to take place in Cowes.

The church was enlarged by George Ward, owner of Northwood House, in 1811. He commissioned John Nash, the famous Regency architect, to design the Bell Tower in 1815. Nash was a friend of Ward and designer of Buckingham Palace and Brighton Pavillion. At the time he lived in the extravagant but long gone East Cowes Castle across the river. The tower was originally built as a mausoleum for the Ward family. The church was rebuilt in 1867 but the tower remains.

The churchyard contains interesting species, Victorian in character including many **Yew** trees – mainly Irish, clipped with a boxy appearance,

some mature **False Acacia** trees, the largest of which can be found on the left of the path approaching the church, and an exotic **Monkey Puzzle** tree **(2)**. This curious species of evergreen conifer was introduced to the UK in 1795, but can be traced right back to the time of the dinosaurs. The name comes from the unusual, large spiny leaves which are said to make it a puzzle for even monkey to climb (right).

From the **Monkey Puzzle**, take the path around the left side of the church and emerge into Northwood Park. This popular park contains more spectacular trees than any other park on the Isle of Wight. Several trees are over 150 years old, dating from the original park landscaping. Some trees are labelled to aid identification.

From here, turn right and walk a short distance towards the large **Oak** tree situated between the path and the rear wall of the church **(3)**. This is possibly the park's oldest tree and almost certainly pre-dates the house. It is thought that this **Common** or **Pendunculate Oak** tree was once a hedgerow **Oak**, a survivor of a more ancient pastoral landscape.

Continue past the **Oak** until reaching the path crossroads and take the left fork which will reveal the impressive front façade of Northwood House, a grade II listed building. The original house, 'Bellevue', was acquired by successful London banker George Ward in 1793. Bellevue was renamed Northwood House and was rebuilt from 1837, however the development of the pleasure grounds of Northwood Park was well underway much earlier by 1815. In 1929, Herbert Joseph Ward, grandson to George presented the house and grounds to Cowes Urban District Council specifying that that the

house should be used as local government offices and the grounds as public pleasure grounds for the residents of Cowes and remains so today.

Northwood, comes from 'the northern wood' because of its northerly situation to the centrally located Parkhurst Forest, the Island's largest wooded area. Northwood House is actually in Cowes, with the village of Northwood now lying to the west.

Pass the house, pausing at the flag pole to take in the parkland panorama. George Ward was a close friend of the Victorian poet laureate Tennyson and together they would often stroll around these magnificent grounds. The original parkland remained virtually intact until after World War II despite Cowes suffering from several heavy bombing raids. It was the Great Storm of 1987 which had the most profound effect on the trees within the park when much damage was inflicted. However, thankfully many of the original trees planted in the 1840s still survive and replacement trees have been planted to become heritage trees of the future.

Take the path between the tennis courts and the bowling green. At the bowls house, cut through the group of trees to the left of the path and onto the grass to find an enormous **Turkey Oak (4)**. This is the fattest tree in the park and is the largest of its kind on the Island. This tree is one of the original trees planted. The species was first introduced from central and eastern Europe to the UK in the 1700s. Within the crook of the trunk is a 'cuckoo' or 'air' tree. This is the name given to trees and shrubs which grow within or on another - a small holly tree thrives here.

Keeping the tennis courts to your left continue ahead until meeting the path which converges from your left. This intersection marks the end of 'The Promenade'. This raised walkway has been in existence since 1844.

Join the path and head right, towards the shady, terraced area in the north-western corner of the park. Here stand several impressive, mature **Holm** or **Evergreen Oak trees (5)**. This tree was introduced from the Mediterranean during the late 16th century. The Victorians later popularised the tree. **Holm Oaks** are common on the Island, thriving in its climate.

Follow the winding path, descending the steps to leave the park and turn left onto Baring Road. Cross Ward Avenue, which once formed the western boundary to Northwood Park, and continue along Baring Road until you see the entrance to Mornington Wood.

Cross the road to join Zig-Zag Path. The path descends the length of the woodland and has existed for over 100 years, linking the Esplanade below to Baring Road. There are several mature **Oak** trees in the woodland and, just to the right of the path, stands the largest **Oak tree (6)**. Until the 1900s this woodland was known as Godwin's Copse. 'Copse' is derived from coppice and tells us that the woodland has a history of traditional management, in this case **Hazel** was selectively cut periodically for timber.

When Cowes became popular with the rich and elite during the Edwardian era, several villas were built along Cowes Esplanade including Mornington House, the holiday home of minor royals. They 'adopted' the adjacent woodland and turned it into a pleasant recreational area for promenading with pathways, glades, ornamental species and seating areas. There is now 60

plant and tree species recorded in Mornington Woods. Re-climb the steps, cross back over and continue along Baring Road. Take care, in places there is no pavement, then cross at the railings taking the next road on the right onto Egypt Hill.

As you descend Egypt Hill a pair of **Macracarpa** or **Monterey Cypress** trees dominate the skyline **(7)**. These two trees mark the entrance to The Moorings, one of the original Victorian villas. These trees are probably contemporary with the earliest plantings on the Island which were thought to have been undertaken by Prince Albert in the 1850s at Osborne. The **Macracarpa** is a native tree of California and was popularised by the Victorians; it does very well on the Island.

At the bottom, cross to Egypt Esplanade and the lion sculpture. This is Egypt Point and was once a favourite yacht racing view point of Queen Victoria. From the lion, head back towards the town along the Esplanade – this road was formed in 1829.

The next tree, an **Austrian Pine**, stands in the garden of Rosetta Cottage **(8)**. Although small in height compared to the **Macracarpas** of Egypt Hill (still visible to your right), it is a fairly unusual species and is rather prominent here on the Esplanade. The cottage has much history attached. It was once a works office for local rope maker who as testament to his skills, apparently built a 1,000ft long rope walk which ran east along what now forms Queens Road. A slate plaque beneath your feet commemorates Rosetta Cottage as the meeting place of Lord Randolph Churchill and Jennie Jerome in 1873, parents to Winston Churchill. The cottage is now in the care of the National Trust and is a private holiday home.

From the **Austrian Pine** continue along The Esplanade towards Princes Green. The green is a public open space, gifted to the town by George Robert Stephenson on condition it would not be used for any commercial purposes and strictly no trees allowed. It was officially opened in 1864 and is named after the Prince Consort.

Cross the green diagonally towards the Umbrella Tree located in the top corner of Princes Green **(9)**. This special tree is a **Weeping Ash**, an ornamental variety of the **Common Ash** and has survived in this exposed coastal location since it was planted in the late 1800s. It was often depicted in Edwardian postcards and the Umbrella Tree, which provides welcome shade in the summer and reveals its wonderfully contorted boughs in the winter, was said to be a favourite place for courting couples. The tree slightly predates its sister tree in East Cowes which features on the Parks and Parasols Histree Trail. Today, it is a local landmark, cherished by the people of the town.

Rejoin the Esplanade and head towards the town. Directly ahead is the Royal Yacht Squadron, the most prestigious yacht club in the UK, given its royal title in 1820 when the Prince Regent became a member.

Turn right into Esplanade Road, and at the top cross over to the entrance of the Holy Trinity churchyard. The church dates from 1832 and is commonly known as the yachtsman's church. Here, six impressive and well maintained **Irish Yew** trees border the steps **(10)**. The **Irish Yew** is a more upright version of the **Common** or **English Yew** often featuring in formal hedgerows and churchyards.

Continue up the steps, past the church and turn left into Trinity Church Lane. Upon meeting the road cross over to the Castle Hill gate to return to Northwood Park. Climb the steps passing through the northern gateway constructed in 1832 and Northwood House will again come into view. At the path crossroads take the left fork and just beyond the shrubs is a magnificent **Mirbeck's Oak (11)**.

The **Mirbeck's** or **Algerian Oak** is semi-evergreen, keeping its leaves until well beyond Christmas. This species of tree was introduced to France from Algeria c.1845 and around the same time, Louis Philippe - the last King of France - sent some acorns to Queen Victoria as a gift. It is thought that some were gifted to the Ward family and that this tree could be among the first of its kind in the UK. This **Mirbeck's Oak** is the best of its kind on the Island; its extensive spreading boughs form a vast canopy measuring 35 metres across.

Return to the path until reaching the **Cork Oak**, the fifth type of **Oak** on the trail **(12)**. This is one of only a few on the Island and one of the finest outside the Osborne Estate. It is an evergreen tree, native to Spain and Portugal. Its unusually thick, deeply-crevassed bark is harvested in sections by hand every ten years. The harvesting does not harm the tree, and a new layer of cork re-grows. Trees are harvested up to a dozen times during their life. The **Cork Oak** forests of Iberia once provided most of the world's cork, sadly this traditional management is now under threat due to the use of synthetic cork and screw-top bottles.

Turn right and head towards the south lawn to a pair of very different original parkland trees. The

Cedar of Lebanon is quite easily the tallest tree in the park and has a circumference of over five metres **(13)**. This species of tree is characterised by its flat top, straight branches and thin dark green needles rather than flat leaves. Look out for the large cones which sit on top of the branches.

The final tree on the Cascading Canopies Histree Trail is an **Oriental Plane (14)**. This tree with its low, extensive branches, starry leaves and knobby trunk is said to have a ghostly past. Some locals won't walk here after dark – they are afraid of what they may see or hear...

It is said that the screams and laughter of children at play are often heard. Ghostly young boys, play on this gnarled, old tree, swinging up and down on its branches. They are dressed in old-fashioned school uniform. In 1918, several children at a nearby private school died during the Spanish influenza epidemic, which killed hundreds of thousands worldwide. Could it be that these spirits at play after death were victims of the killer flu? Also, can you spot the dog tag that is wedged into the tree's roots? What was the dog's name?

To return to the start, join the path and head to your left, passing the apartment block on your left to emerge into the car park. You will see the London Plane, the first tree on the trail down hill to your left.

Thank you for walking the Cascading Canopies Histree Trail. There are seven other Histree Trails in the series for you to enjoy.

Cascading Canopies Histree Trail

1.7 miles / 2.7 km

