

Ticket to Ryde

Isle of Wight Warners Holiday 16 to 20th June

This would be our second visit to the picturesque Isle of Wight and our fourth Warners holiday, so we set off with high expectations. The weather was glorious and we were very grateful for the air conditioning on the coach. We had our trusty helmsman Stewart at the wheel, so we knew we were in safe hands. It was a 7am start, but all turned up promptly and off we went.

It was a long journey, so we did have a couple of pit stops en route. It was interesting to see how motorway facilities had improved, such as dog stations with water and also a laundry, presumably for long- distance drivers. I was amused to see on the display advert that the clothes to be laundered included bras and frilly knickers. How times have changed indeed! The traffic was backed up in places so we were slightly late for the ferry, but the crossing was smooth and the view across the Solent magnificent. There were yachts, with sails billowing, making the most of the breeze, ferries and vast oil tankers, clearly a busy route. At last we reached our destination, the Warners hotel at Bembridge.

Warners hotels are clearly chosen for their locations and this was no exception. Situated overlooking the beach and with a perfect view across to Portsmouth, you could clearly see the Spinnaker Tower from the terrace. There was a croquet lawn and a beautiful walled garden, complete with lily pond and tame ducks, very different from the feral fowl at Nidd Hall. That's Northerners for you! My room was light and airy and looked over to the garden where the fountain glistened in the sun. The indoor facilities were as before, but the highlight for me was the sun terrace. After a hard day's sightseeing, there was no better combination than a cold beverage and that view!

One of the many highlights of previous stays was the evening entertainment, in this case held in The Admiral's Club. The resident band, New Horizon, played every night and were excellent, especially their acoustics evening. The Warners Theatre Company appeared twice. On Monday night, they delighted their audiences with hits from a variety of musicals and on our last night, cover versions of well-known tunes from a wide variety of genres. They are so professional you could truly believe you were in the West End. We had a guest appearance from a wonderful soprano, Emily Haig, whose rendition of Nessun Dorma had the audience on its feet. She appears regularly at large venues like football stadiums and I'm sure many people recognised her. The comedian and impersonator Christopher Gee brought Boris and Trump to life. There were also soloists in many of the lounges so we were never bored. There was even an indoors bowls green.

Day 2: Fortified by a good night's sleep on comfy beds and a large breakfast, we set off on our day out to Osborne House. Now for the history bit! With their growing family, Victoria and Albert wanted a more sizeable rural retreat and so bought Osborne House, knocking down most of the original house and rebuilding in the style of an Italian palazzo. It was where the couple were happiest, walking down to the beach daily and celebrating birthdays in style. They traditionally had a Birthday Room with a Birthday Table, full to the brim of wonderful works of art which were their presents of choice, now on display throughout the house as were clear signs of the true love match theirs was. Victoria's first birthday there was her 29th, when she was awoken by a band playing outside her bedroom window, and

she then received “many lovely things..such a quantity from dearest Albert.” After his death, she avoided Osborne for her birthday but celebrated Christmas instead. She spent her last Christmas there in 1900 and died in her bedroom five weeks later.

It would take forever to describe the wonderful objets d’art on display throughout the house, from pottery to marble sculptures to glassware to paintings. One fabulous example of the latter was the depiction of Victoria and Albert with their many children, a very happy group indeed. My favourite room, I have to say, was the Durbar Room. To approach it you pass through a corridor with numerous drawings and sketches of Indian princes or simple peasants. Victoria was Empress of India though she never visited the country, and became increasingly fascinated with it. Part of this was due to her association with Abdul Karim who became one of her closest confidants in her final years. He was one of two Indian attendants selected to serve her for her Diamond Jubilee in 1887. His portrait shows he was quite a dish, and it hangs beside another portrait of Karim painted by Victoria herself, emphasising their close friendship. She referred to him as her Munshi, or teacher, as he taught her Hindustani and many native customs. Their intimacy provoked a lot of jealousy and he was sent home to India after her death. (Look for the film *Victoria and Abdul* if you haven’t seen it.)

The Durbar Room (state reception room) was designed by Rudyard Kipling’s father, Lockwood Kipling, and master carver Bhai Ram Singh. Finished in 1891, it is decorated to resemble marble and the windows are also oriental in style. The huge dining table is decorated as it would have been when European royalty were present and the cabinets on both sides of the room contain the most amazing gifts from her Indian subjects, decorated with precious stones, gold filigree and ivory, known as address boxes. These were used to deliver loyal greetings from Indian dignitaries. After much-needed refreshment at the terrace café, you could wander to the beach, explore the terrace itself with its magnificent fountain or the walled garden. Then back to the hotel and our terrace with a cold glass or three! The weather was so hot Brian was seen in shorts!

Wednesday was a free day but there was a lot to do. You could try archery, axe-throwing (I bet we could all think of political figures we could use as targets)or the pool. Why not paint a pebble or two? The afternoon talk by the RNLI was excellent and very well attended and their nearby station was a timely reminder of how much we rely on their bravery and selflessness. Some went further afield e g the local garlic farm. The last time I was here I learned a bit about Carisbrooke Castle, so my friend and I decided to go there. As I’m not sure anyone else went I will keep this section brief. (Thank heaven, I hear you cry!) Its main claim to fame is as the prison of Charles 1 from 1647 to 8. He lived in some style, but was more restricted after his two attempts to escape, neither very dignified. Firstly, he got stuck between the bars of his bedroom window and second time round, he bribed two guards who subsequently betrayed him. There was a very intimate exhibition of his belongings, including one of the two shirts he wore to his execution, wanting to ensure he did not shake from cold as people would mistake this for fear -really moving to see. There was also a lovely Edwardian garden in honour of Princess Beatrice, who lived there for many summers after she became Governor of the island in 1913.

On Thursday we headed off to Cowes. The IOW festival was on but the traffic wasn’t too heavy. Cowes is famous for its sailing regattas, culminating in Cowes Week in August. It has

a castle built by Henry VIII to defend its strategic position and boasts many local industries involving manufacturing boat parts or machinery. There were many luxury yachts in evidence, sadly none of them mine. It was extremely hot, so a leisurely amble along the small streets, looking into their shop windows and cafes, took as much energy as we could muster, and Brian was in shorts again! Following this we headed to Ryde, our berth last visit, where you had stunning views across to Portsmouth from the top of the main street. Down in the harbour, you could see the only two remaining hovercraft still operational. I think that is such a pity as they are magnificent to watch. I believe the military still use them though. Then back to Bembridge -and packing!

Our journey back was long but uneventful on another scorching day. It was sad to see the sparkling Solent and Brian's shorts disappear! As always, it was a fantastic break and I really enjoyed the trips we did. In the spirit of honest reporting like Woodward and Bernstein, however, I must say that there were issues with the hotel, mainly with the food, some rooms and aspects of service. This was disappointing after our three wonderful Warners breaks, but there was so much to recommend the place I am sure any issues will be resolved. I am certainly not deterred from using Warners again and I'm confident Studley will be first class.

All that remains for me is to thank Jane, Chris and Brian for all the effort they put into giving us such marvellous, well-organised holidays- even the weather! Thanks to Stewart, who navigated the nightmare IOW roads with his usual skill. I can't wait for the next break and thank you all for your company on our tour of this lovely island gem.

Barbara Pearce