

BLACKGANG CHINE

First recorded in 1781, the name derives not from the rather picturesque suggestion of a “black gang of smugglers”, but ‘the dark path or track’ from Old English ‘bloec’ and ‘gang’, while chine is from ‘cinu’ a ‘fissure or ravine’. In 1800, it was a steep, gaunt ravine approximately 500 feet above the sea overlooking Chale Bay. It stretched three quarters of a mile down to the shore, and was a wild and desolate place, frequented only by local fishermen during the mackerel season. Alexander Dabell, who saw himself as a pioneer, studied the awe-inspiring gorge, and knew he could develop gardens which would appeal to the romantic Victorians. By 1842 he had concluded a lease, said to be an amount of land measured by his ability to throw a stone, and opened the Chine to the public. Pathways were built down the ravine, gardens landscaped on top of the cliffs, and steps were constructed down to the beach.



RAF BLACKGANG

Although official records contain very little about this station, it had a crew of over one hundred, billeted in the village of Niton. It was a ground control interception station equipped with a mobile rotating aerial, and its role was to provide highly accurate information to Fighter Command on the exact local location of the enemy. It was certainly working very

ST CATHERINE'S ORATORY

Known locally as the “Pepperpot”, the oratory is an eight-sided tower with a cone roof and four buttresses which look like rocket fins. It is the oldest mediaeval lighthouse in Britain, standing 35.5ft high and over 750ft above sea level. A local story about how it was built, concerns a merchant ship which ran aground on Atherfield Ledge in April 1313, with its cargo of wine illegally sold by the surviving sailors to local Islanders. Walter de Godeton, who lived in Chale Manor, soon had 53 of the 174 casks of wine, and was subsequently charged with illegally receiving the casks and fined 227.7 marks. The owners of the wine, the monastery of Livers in Picardy, considered this to be sacrilege, and the ecclesiastical court in Rome told Walter he would be excommunicated from the church unless he atoned for his sin by building a lighthouse on top of Chale Down. Much of the story is true, but probably unconnected with the Pepperpot, which had been repaired in 1312 before the merchant ship foundered, although it is likely he had to maintain the lighthouse.



The oratory was endowed to maintain a monk to tend the light and say masses for souls lost at sea, these duties continuing until the Dissolution of the Monasteries; you can still see the distinctive roofline on the side of the building, where the vanished chapel once stood. For nearly three centuries the spot was unmarked by any friendly light, and shipwrecks

were numerous. The beautiful coast, so pleasant to travel in fine weather, was cruel and treacherous, pitilessly exacting year by year the lives of many seamen. At certain seasons dense impenetrable mists arise obscuring both lights and landmarks, with hapless ships borne on the rapid inshore current towards the jagged rocks. These considerations moved the Trinity Board to commence building a new lighthouse in 1785, but it was never completed. The ruin of the base of this building can still be seen, and was known to Islanders as either the Salt Shaker or the Mustard Pot.

While walking up St Catherine's Hill, notice the mediaeval cultivation terraces and strip lynchets. This evidence of ploughing can be seen on many hill slopes throughout Britain, and demonstrate the scarcity of land in the Middle Ages, which made it necessary to take much more marginal land into cultivation.

Compiler of information leaflet - Carrie McDowell, AONB Assistant

For further information about the work of the Isle of Wight AONB Partnership, please contact the AONB Unit, Seaclose Offices, Fairlee Road, Newport, Isle of Wight PO30 2QS. Telephone 01983 823855; e-mail aonb@iow.gov.uk; Website www.wightaonb.org.uk



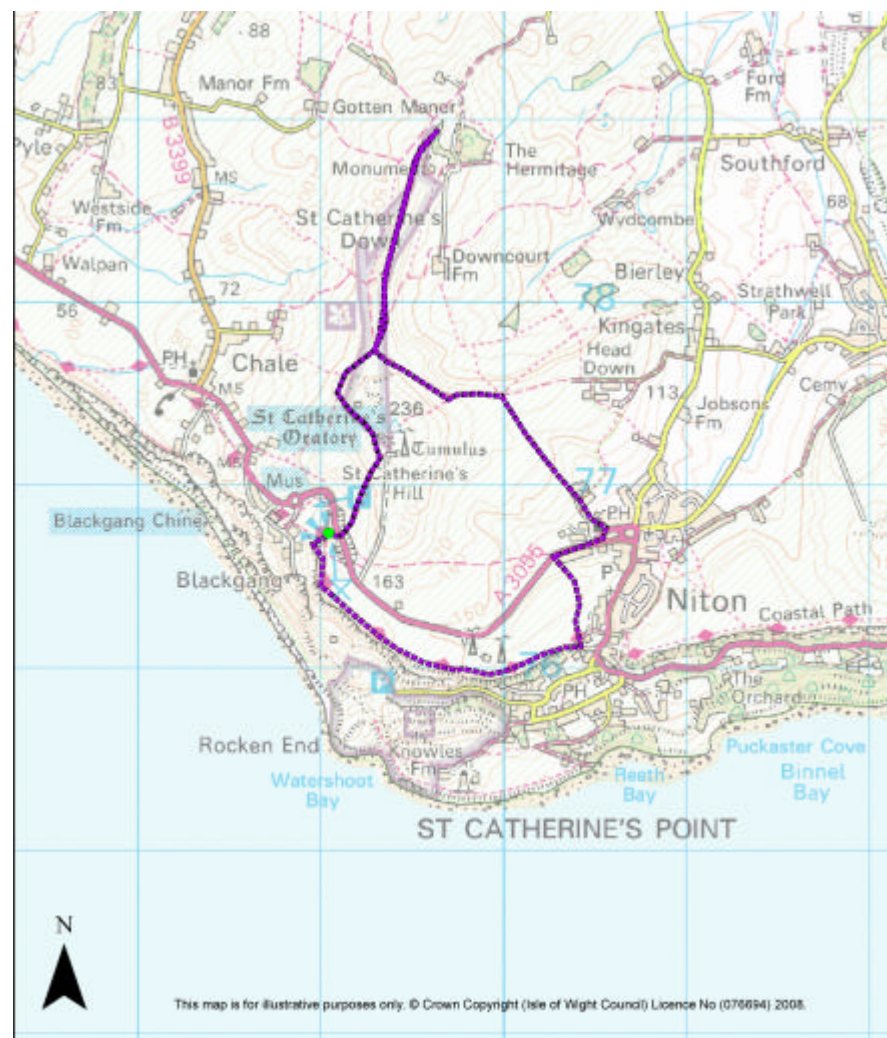
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OVER UNDERCLIFF AND UP DOWNS



Isle of Wight
area of outstanding
natural beauty



It was eventually mounted on a lower tower attached to the front of the lighthouse, and built as a small replica. This resultant step down between the two towers is locally referred to as “The Cow and the Calf”.

A tragic accident occurred at the station on 01 June 1943, when the three keepers sheltering in the engine house were killed when it was destroyed in a bombing raid. They are buried in St John’s churchyard Niton, and a remembrance plaque to them is displayed on the ground floor of the main tower.

The main light is visible for up to thirty nautical miles in clear weather, and is the third most powerful light in the Trinity House Service. There is a fixed red subsidiary light displayed from a window below the main light, and shown westward over the Atherfield Ledge. Of all the long southern coastline of the Island which has harvested untold thousands of vessels over the millennia, the half mile square Atherfield Ledge was the greatest menace of all. This shambles of rock ledges, reefs and slabs juts out into the broad sweep of the south-west coast dividing Brighstone and Chale bays, and acts as a focus for the incoming tide. So many ships were lost in this area, that Chale became known as the “Bay of Death”.

The lighthouse was a weather station for some years, with the keepers making hourly reports on temperature, humidity, cloud height and formation and wind direction and force. Following de-manning in 1997, an automatic weather reporting station was installed, which now sends details of weather conditions to the Meteorological Office. The lighthouse itself is now monitored and controlled from the Trinity House Operations Control Centre at Harwich.

NITON

A mediaeval parish two miles west of St Lawrence referred to as *Neeton* in the Domesday Book, the name meaning ‘new farmstead or settlement’ from Old English ‘niwe’ and ‘tun’. It was at one time known locally as ‘Crab Niton’ from the abundance of crabs caught off the coast here.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Niton became a favourite locality for residence, owing to its sheltered position and mild air, with fuschia and myrtle flourishing here as nowhere else on the Island. The main

street runs north and south, intersected by the road from Whitwell, which continues towards the western end of the village.

The church of St John the Baptist stands under the down, and comprises a nave, chancel, north and south aisles and a western tower surmounted by a stone spire. In Saxon times a church existed on this site which was dedicated to St Michael, but this was demolished shortly following the Norman Conquest. The current building dates back to the 1070’s early 1080’s, and the nave may have been part of the original structure. The north and south aisles were added in the 12th and 13th centuries respectively followed by the chancel. Subsequent alternations took



place in the 15th and 16th centuries, including widening the south aisle, removing the north aisle and building the tower, which had its spire added probably in the 17th century. In the south wall of the chancel is an opening to the rood-loft, and in the easternmost pier of the north aisle a piscina is inserted, pointing to the former existence of an altar here. In the churchyard stands the base of a churchyard cross, which has been replaced by a modern one with a Celtic motif. General restoration took place in 1864 by rebuilding the north aisle, adding another bay to the north arcade, and removing both the gun-house and the buttress south of the chancel.

THE HOY MONUMENT

Michael Hoy was a gentleman of substance in the Regency period of the 19th century, who not only made his mark in society at the time, but also left a tangible reminder of his presence in the form of what has become one of the Isle of Wight's most distinctive landmarks, and is also known as the Alexandrian Pillar. It rises 72 feet into the windswept sky above St Catherine's Down, with a plaque on the south face of the base which explains it was erected to commemorate the visit to Britain in 1814 of Tsar Alexander 1 of Russia. As a wealthy entrepreneur, member of the thriving Russian company of merchant venturers and making his fortune in the Russian capital St Petersburg, Hoy had personal reasons to be grateful to the Tsar, and was believed to have known him personally.



He was born around 1758 in London, becoming in 1792 a Yeoman of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers, in 1798 Freeman of the City and Sheriff of London for the year 1812/13. He had already begun to amass land and property on the Island, one being the substantial Hermitage country house in the lee of the down where he erected his monument. He died in 1828 and a subsequent tenant of the Hermitage, a William Henry Dawes of the 22nd Regiment of Foot, placed a plaque on the north face of the pillar's base, in memory of British soldiers who fell at Inkerman and Sevastopol. Perhaps he was annoyed by the column's tribute to the Russian monarch, whose descendant led the troops opposing Britain in the Crimean War.

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effectively by 1942, and operated independently from the nearby RAF stations at St Lawrence and Ventnor. It is possible that a 'tip and run' raid by four FW190s on 01 June 1943 was aimed at destroying this radar station, if so it failed in its purpose. The raid actually destroyed the nearby Undercliff Hotel, perhaps under the impression it was the radar operations room. This room is the only part of the station that survives today, and is now used as a cow shelter.

ST CATHERINE'S LIGHTHOUSE

The present tower was constructed in 1838, following the loss of the sailing ship Clarendon on rocks near the site. It was built of ashlar stone with dressed quoins, and designed from a base plinth as a three tier octagon diminishing by stages. The elevation of the light proved to be too high, as the lantern was frequently obscured by mist so in 1875, it was decided to lower the light by thirteen metres. Unfortunately, this had the effect of destroying its beauty by giving it a rather stunted appearance.



The fog signal house used to be situated near the edge of the cliff, but owing to erosion and cliff settlements, the building developed such serious cracks that in 1932, it became necessary to re-locate it.

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