Isle Of Wight excursion in an Austin A60 Cambridge

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Kim Henson continues our series which looks at the enjoyment that touring by cars, new or old, can still bring, this time covering a happy trip to the Isle of Wight in a classic ‘family’ Austin…

BY CAMBRIDGE TO THE ISLE OF WIGHT



The vehicle used for this trip means a great deal to me. It was purchased by my grandfather in June 1973 and has been in\my family ever since. During that time I’ve helped to look after it, and the car has been used for many happy family holidays and day trips.

More than 40 years down the line since that sunny June day when Grandad, Dad and I first set eyes on ‘KP’, it seemed to be the perfect vehicle for my wife Elaine and I to take on a

long weekend visit to the Isle of Wight.

'Anchored' across the Solent, and within the English Channel just to the south of Hampshire, the Isle of Wight is easily accessible by ferry from a number of departure points on the mainland (or, as some locals call it, 'the big island to the north'!).

In recent years we have crossed the Solent many times, notably to visit long-standing friends who live on the Island, but on every occasion the magic of the place shines through, and we are always pleased to return there, if only for a day trip.



Whichever car ferry route you take (from Lymington or Portsmouth, by Wightlink, or from Southampton, by Red Funnel), during your short sea crossing there's enough time to have a relaxing hot drink and a snack, or simply enjoy the maritime views as the Hampshire coastline recedes and that of the island beckons.
(If you are travelling as a foot passenger, without a car, you have the additional options of crossing with Hovertravel from Southsea to Ryde Pier – this takes just 10 minutes each way, or using Red Funnel's 'Red Jet' service from Southampton to West Cowes – in this case the journey occupies about 25 minutes in each direction).

To decide which ferry service is best for you, you need to check the respective timetables for available services and costs. In addition, of course, it can depend from where on the mainland you are travelling.

Ever since I first visited the Island when I was a lad, I've loved the unique atmosphere of the

place. I have always been impressed by the fact that the local people are friendly and welcoming, the pace of life is slower than on the mainland, and there's no desire nor need to travel anywhere at great speed. Indeed, as far as I am concerned, meandering along the Island's many picturesque by-ways (there are no 'through-routes', as such) is a welcome change from the everyday rushing on mainland motorways that so many of us have to endure in our daily lives.

Approximately 25 miles from end to end, and 15 miles north to south, the largest of the English islands is compact but incorporates wide diversity in its various different localities, all waiting to be explored. It's beautiful too; about half of the area of the Island is designated an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'.



We have travelled to the Island both by Red Funnel and Wightlink. In each case have found the crossings very pleasant, with helpful staff. On this occasion we joined the line-up of cars waiting to board at Lymington

(Wightlink crossing).

STAY A WHILE?

While, of course, it is ideal if you can spend a few days, a week, or even longer on the Island, don't be put off if you haven't got more than a single day to spare. In fact a day trip will give you a very good flavour of what this idyllic place has to offer, and it is quite possible to do a tour – albeit abbreviated – around the Island in one day. You can then return on another occasion, to spend longer exploring. Incidentally, whichever ferry you use to reach the Island, you will find useful free information booklets on board (almost always incorporating a map), providing some useful suggestions for places of interest to visit.

DRIVING SOUTHWARDS?

All the ferries from the mainland disembark at ports along the north coast of the Island. Often, on arrival, people rush to drive southwards, but if you have the time it is first worth spending a while looking around Yarmouth, West or East Cowes or Ryde (from west to east respectively); all these small towns have much to offer the inquisitive traveller.

Just a few miles (about 10 minutes) south of Cowes is the Island's County Town (and administrative centre) of Newport. The town is the main destination for many, for shopping (and, incidentally, it is also home to the only section of dual carriageway on the Isle of Wight!).

If you find yourself in the west of the Island, Alum Bay and The Needles beckon. It's well worth exploring the coast here, with (for example) its layered multi-coloured sands in distinctive bands (it is said that these days the Island is positioned 'on its side', accounting for these layers of different colours).

The compact town of Freshwater is just a few minutes away, and nearby (a little to the south and east) can be found the Chessell Pottery Barns. In addition to the working pottery itself, plus a café offering tasty snacks and meals using local produce, is a decorating studio and a shop in which you can buy all sorts of goodies – including local paintings and books, also

reproduction versions of children's games from decades ago. I spent a long time here…

A short drive southwards from Chessell Pottery Barns (we saw wild red squirrels in this area too) will bring you to the old military road running along the southern edge of the Island, and on a day when the weather is kind, this provides beautiful sea views for miles in each direction. To the far west can be seen the hills and cliffs of Dorset.

Continuing eastwards along the coast, you will encounter the temptations of various establishments offering food and drink, but whether or not you succumb, you will soon arrive at Ventnor, on the south coast of the Island. It should also be mentioned that if you prefer following inland roads through wonderful rolling scenery and sleepy villages, alternative routes eastwards are available, and you are never far from a pleasant country pub (for example) providing good meals at sensible prices. (We have seen wild red squirrels in this area too).

Whichever route you take to get to Ventnor, it's worth visiting the Botanic Garden, if you have time. Perched on the south-facing coast, and with a wonderful array of plants (including sub-tropical and 'exotic' varieties, which flourish in the helpful microclimate there), the Garden also has a visitor centre with a shop and café.

A very steep, zig-zag road descent into the town brings you and your car to the sea front and the popular beach (with an array of seaside shops and places to eat). Ventnor is just one of many Isle of Wight south coast resorts with lovely beaches ideal for families (although of course the sea and tides need to be treated with great respect at all times.

Climbing eastwards out of Ventnor, the winding main road brings you soon to Shanklin (with plenty of hotels and guest houses). The town is reached by driving through the very picturesque and famous 'Old Village' (with nearby wooded ravine) just to the west of the main built-up area.

Shanklin and nearby Sandown are both 'traditional' seaside resorts offering attractive, lovely promenades, and a selection of good hotels, plus pleasant places to eat and drink. At

Shanklin ‘The Lift’ takes those who are not keen on walking, the 50 yards or so upwards from the esplanade to the cliff top, or vice versa.



After we crossed the sunlit Solent to Yarmouth (about 40 minutes), we enjoyed the short drive westwards to Freshwater, then inland towards the Island’s south coast. We stopped for a tasty lunch at the fascinating Chessell Pottery Barns.



After reaching the old military road, high up on the south coast, we headed east, enjoying sea views as we travelled, then stopping en route at the picturesque Ventnor Botanic Garden – this requires plenty of time to fully appreciate.



When pausing at the Ventnor Botanic Garden, we even found a ‘special’ car parking space for our A60; the slot was lined with attractive shrubbery. The climate on this sheltered part of the Island’s south coast is kind to plants.



After an overnight stop in Shanklin, we ventured further east, via Sandown towards Bembridge. We branched off the main road to climb the steep hill leading to Culver Battery and Bembridge Fort, with spectacular views on the way up…



Today Bembridge Down is peaceful, and driving round the narrow track that encircles the wind-blown headland on which the Fort was built is delightfully quiet too. However, the Fort has a long history of defending our shores (from 1862)…

THE SOUTH-EAST OF THE ISLAND

From Sandown it is just a few miles and a few minutes to Bembridge (well worth exploring) and to Brading. In addition to its Roman villa and restored railway station buildings, Brading is home to the popular ‘Oasis’ retail outlet, selling fascinating objects, art items and furniture from around the world (there’s a café here too…).

Not far to the east of Sandown, and past the Isle of Wight Zoo, if you are travelling along the Yaverland Road coastal route, you will come to a mini-roundabout on the B3395 (which links Brading and Bembridge). If you head for Bembridge at this point, after a few hundred yards is a narrow, steep lane running uphill to the right (immediately after a sharp left-hand bend). Taking this enticing cul-de-sac (Culver Down Road) is worth doing, and will bring you to one of my favourite parts of the Island…



The Yarborough

As the road climbs to the headland at the southern end of Culver

Down (a chalk down, rich in wildlife), the views to the right (towards Sandown, Shanklin and the hilly centre part of the Island) become ever more beautiful. As the headland is reached, to the left are magnificent views across the Solent to Portsmouth and the coastline eastwards from there. Along the way, the track passes the Bembridge/Culver Down Fort (a Palmerston Fort, built during the 1860s). This is now owned by the National Trust, and is open to the public for guided tours, by arrangement.

Monument (please also see main text) is located at the top of Culver Down, having been moved from its original position in advance of the construction of the Palmerston Forts.

The headland is also home to the remains of the World War II Culver Battery (gun emplacements) and the Yarborough Monument. This is a memorial to the Second Baron Yarborough, Charles Anderson-Pelham, who founded the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes.

For those in need of refreshment, there's the Culver Haven pub (with fabulous views) and a separate small café .

Parking on the headland is free of charge, and there are plenty of wide open grassy areas where people can stop awhile and enjoy the breathtaking views and the fresh air. There's room for everyone, with no crowding…

I must admit that on two out of the three days my wife and I spent on the Island on our long weekend with the A60, we enjoyed relaxing picnics on the unspoilt Culver Down, followed by long walks around the headland, admiring the wild flowers and the birds (which entertained us with their happy aerobatic exploits and cheerful singing). It's true that we were helped by the weather, which by chance was beautiful at the time of our visit.



Looking to the left from the Culver Down headland are sea views taking in Whitecliff Bay, just to the east. In the far distance can be seen the mainland's southern coastline, running eastwards from Hampshire into Sussex.



Here our trusty A60 pauses for a while in one of the many parking areas available on Culver Down – all free of charge, most with spectacular sea views and all providing plenty of fresh air to blow away the cobwebs!



Culver Down has plant, bird and insect wildlife in abundance, and with plenty of springy turf topping the chalk base. Depending on your preference, walking can be easy (on the main paths), or more challenging…



On a sun-bathed hot summer afternoon, the views looking westwards from Culver Down are especially lovely. In this shot the seaside resorts of Sandown and Shanklin can be seen, with the rolling hills beyond.



To the north-east of Culver Down are views across to Bembridge and its aerodrome, with (on a clear day) Portsmouth and its Spinnaker Tower visible beyond the Solent.



Yours truly with the Austin A60 Cambridge purchased by my grandfather over 40 years prior to this Isle of Wight Trip. During all of its time with my family, the car has always been a faithful friend.



A reminder of less peaceful times… The Culver Battery gun emplacement provides stark contrast with the surrounding natural beauty of Culver Down. For many years (until 1966) this area was a ‘no go’ place for the public.



A National Trust signboard gives fascinating information about the origins of the Culver Battery, which was manned in both Word Wars in the last Century. The original proposals for a battery here had been made in 1887.



A National Trust information sign also provides information about the huge Bembridge (Culver Down) Fort, built between 1862 and 1867 as a defence against possible invasion by France’s Napoleon III.



Even today the Bembridge Fort is impressive, incorporating massive brick walls and a deep moat. Its position, high up on the Culver Down headland, was strategically important, with excellent sea views to the south.



Even on a summer Sunday, there's usually plenty of room on the grass-covered, free-of-charge car parks on the west side of Culver Down. This is a great place for breathing fresh air, picnicking, going for long walks with sea views…



Unexpected views around every corner… We found this one just a few yards from the main car park on the Culver Down headland. The nearby cliffs have their dangers of course, but there is plenty of safe walking on the main paths.



Back in Shanklin as evening falls, the Fisherman's Cottage pub (on the Esplanade, just below Shanklin Chine) and the calm blue sea take on a magical air as the lights come on.



The Old Village at Shanklin is good to explore; there are many shops, tea rooms and pubs here. The nearby attractive Rylstone Gardens and the zig-zag walk down (with sea views) to the Esplanade are also worthy of investigation.



This shot was taken one evening from the zig-zag walk at Rylstone, looking towards Red Cliff and Culver Down. (On days when there's a beautiful sunset, the cliffs at Red Cliff eventually turn red – hence the name).



The Shanklin Theatre – attractive inside and out – plays host to big names, as well as performances by amateur dramatic associations (such as the excellent Newchurch Drama Group – while in town we watched them perform).



From the hills inland, towards the centre of the island, there are views in all directions across rolling countryside to the sea. This shot was taken looking westwards, from near Newport Golf Course.



We stayed at Shanklin but couldn’t resist a run in the evening sunshine along the old military road running along the Island’s south coast. This provides unspoilt sea views to the south and west (and the mainland coast of Dorset).



Relatively quiet roads, wonderful countryside and coastlines, and no necessity to be in a hurry make touring on the Isle of Wight especially happy in a classic car like our Austin A60 Cambridge, seen here on the Island’s south coast.



A bright morning at Shanklin… On the last day of our Island break, we ventured down to the sea to see the sun on the surf for the last time before departing for our mainland home. We shall hurry back again for sure though!

ALL WIGHT

It was with heavy hearts that we eventually headed back to the mainland. However, we had very much enjoyed our short excursion, and our old Cambridge seemed to be happy to be out in the sunshine in such a wonderful place too.

We covered about 100 miles in total on Island roads. The driving was worry-free, other motorists were courteous, and the old Austin's fuel consumption was a commendable 34 mpg. Its prodigious low speed torque (pulling power) helped to make driving very easy, and little gear changing was required, even in the hilly parts of the Island (with the exception of the very steep descent into, and climb out of Ventnor –second gear definitely required here!!).

Our Island 'Adventure' seemed to me to be a brilliant and fitting way to celebrate more than four decades of happy family ownership of the A60.

If you haven't ever explored the Isle of Wight, or haven't been back for a while, I can definitely recommend it – ideally in a classic car but any vehicle will do! I should ad that the Island is a great place for walking – especially around the coastal fringes, and in the hilly, inland areas.

…And finally: This brief feature cannot hope to include all the places worth visiting on the Island (and indeed we didn't visit them all on this one trip; but we'll definitely be back again for further exploration!!!). For example, there's Osborne House (home of Queen Victoria), near to both East Cowes and Newport, and of course Carisbrooke Castle (also just outside Newport), plus Blackgang Chine (on the south coast), to name but three.

OUR CAR:

1964 Austin A60 Cambridge, family owned since June 1973.



Engine: 1622cc overhead valve (pushrod)

Power: 61 bhp @ 4,500 rpm

Torque: 90 lb.ft. at 2,100 rpm

0-60 mph: 21 sec.

Max. speed: 85 mph

MPG: 32-36

(To find out more about Austin Cambridge A55 Mark II/A60 models and the other ‘Family Farina’ derivatives, please click HERE).