

A Perfect Place: Freshwater

Dr Andrew French. September 2017. A Winchester College Chapel talk.

Poetry and rocket science. Multi-coloured sandstone and bleached white chalk cliffs. Of lighthouse and piracy. Where Marconi pioneered wireless radio telegraphy, and the birthplace of England's greatest scientific polymath, Robert Hooke. Of chairlifts, early portrait photography and one of the world's largest rock festivals. Of fossils, sandcastles and family picnics. Of erosion and passing. Of metallic blue and crimson sunsets. The sublime interface between earth, sea and sky. Freshwater.

The civil parishes of Freshwater and Totland¹ are at the western tip of the Isle of Wight, a diamond shaped Island, conveniently oriented like a compass rose, just a few kilometers the south of the lower latitudes of England, or "the Mainland", as we Islanders like to call it. In this talk we will complete a clockwise coastal journey, from Compton Bay to Yarmouth. Is this twenty kilometers of geographic appendage worthy of the title of *A Perfect Place*? I think it is, especially if we briefly dwell on what *Perfect* means. From a no-nonsense rational, *engineering*, perspective, *perfection* implies an *optimal solution* to a set of *requirements*. On a personal level, and this *is* a personal talk, Freshwater's landscape, history and cultural heritage align very closely with my own, and somewhat eclectic, interests. My requirements for an interesting life. Alternatively, we may associate the more romantic idea of the *sublime* - a place imbued with a natural beauty which inspires a sense of *aliveness* to all who experience this land. Words and pictures. Arts and Science. Geography and History. Adventure, contemplation, home. This is me and this is Freshwater.

Straight outta Compton! N.W.A. That is, "Needles With Alum," rather than the controversial and potty mouthed Los Angeles hip hop group of the late 1980s that my school friends would covertly listen to using their Sony walkman personal cassette players in the playgrounds of West Wight Middle School, which is now a housing estate. The white cliffs of Tennyson Down, tapering to the iconic thirty meter high chalk stacks of the Needles, form the western backdrop to Compton Bay. My

¹ The parish of Totland is the most westerly part of the Isle of Wight. The parish of Freshwater is an adjacent vertical slice of the Island.

personal place of pilgrimage. This is a wild section of mostly sandy beach, subject to significant erosion which often reveals the fossilized remains of the Island's prehistoric past. It is a reasonable surf break and boasts a small shipwreck which emerges from the waves at low tide. There is something about the place which comforts and invigorates, and it has particular meaning to me. I spent countless summer days with my extended family moving from body surfing in the sea, to the creation of extravagant ball runs in the sand, to the promise of gastronomic delights and cold orange squash from my grandmother's yellow plastic ice box. The gentle boom of the breaking waves is one of the most soothing sounds I know. Human, animal and machine noise keep me awake, but I have been known to sleep peacefully through the wildest turbulence that the Weather Wizard can conjure. The unbroken horizon to the south is a canvas to paint your thoughts, and a perfect foundation to build models of the mind. I love reading and thinking at Compton. The residual warmth of the sand during sunset, and the subtle aroma of earth and seawater evoke vivid memories of childhood. Of returning home, sandy and swaddled in warm toweling robes, in a green Mini Clubman with leather seats and, *surprising* suspension, with an whirring that made the car sound like it was always in reverse. Compton is also where my beloved grandfather, Bob French, of Saunders Roe, British Hovercraft corporation and HMS Belfast, who educated me through stories, drawings and cold banana and custard, passed away.

From Compton we head west to Freshwater Bay. An irony indeed as the water is entirely saline. Just inland is Dimbola lodge, home to the pioneering Victorian female photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, and more recently the scene of cake fuelled open mic evenings that my father and I have often performed at. From Farringford House to the huge granite cross standing one hundred and forty seven metres above sea level, is a testament to Tennyson, who lived there for forty years until his death in 1892.

"Where, far from noise and smoke of town
I watch the twilight falling brown,
All round a careless-ordered garden
Close to the ridge of a noble down"

The current fortunes of the Island are mixed and there is perhaps much wistful rose-tintery among the more artistic of residents. However, "Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." One such revival *has* been quite successful, and that is the Isle of Wight pop festival, which of course you must immediately forget about as it is conveniently timed to coincide with your IGCSE and Pre-U examinations. Over a sultry week in August 1970, Afton Down, which overlooks Compton, was the site of *the* Isle of Wight Festival. It was attended by up to 700,000 people, much bigger than Woodstock and over six times the local population. It had a sublime lineup including Miles Davis, The Who, Joni Mitchell, Emerson Lake & Palmer, The Doors, Free and Jimi Hendrix. It was indeed a *Message to Love*, but probably had really bad toilets.

The walk up to the Tennyson monument from Freshwater bay is always invigorating; for the thighs and calves, and also for the mind when one turns around and contemplates the yacht-filled Solent on the left, and on the right the moody English channel and its rugged littoral culminating in the Undercliff and quirky theme park of Blackgang Chine. From the summit there is a gentle stretch of trim grassy downland which dramatically tapers to a cluster of buildings. This is the Needles Battery, which overlooks the sea-only accessible and chalk-strata wonderland of Scratchell's Bay to the south and the multi-coloured-sand, geologist's paradise of Alum Bay to the north. Alum Bay derives its name from the presence of sulphide ions contained within the yellow *jarosite encrustations* which form part of a pastel shaded cliff panorama. Black *lignitic* compressed plant matter, green *glauconite* clays, white quartz sands and red and yellow hued iron oxide *limonites* provide the chemical basis of a palette which is used as backdrop for a tranquil beachside picnic, exciting chair lift ride, or sand-in-glass-tube touristic souvenir.

But Alum Bay and the Needles are a place of much wider scientific importance. Guglielmo² Marconi helped refine his invention of the wireless radio telegraph here in 1897. Pretty much all of modern communication and remote sensing technology, from mobile phones to Radar, stem from Marconi's pioneering experiments. Around the same time at the end of the nineteenth century, the Needles Battery was being established as a Naval defense, and was eventually equipped with three 9.2 inch breech loading guns. Each could fire a shell weighing 172kg. During World War II, anti-aircraft guns were also installed at the site, and both sets of weapons were used against the Luftwaffe and German U-Boats. After the war the site was decommissioned, and then transformed into a secret rocket testing base.

Between 1956 and 1972, twenty seven rockets were tested at the High Down site. Over two hundred engineers and scientists worked in a complex of buildings, gantries and refurbished bunkers during this time. James Bond, *Star Trek* and *Thunderbirds* made real. The geography, and privacy, afforded by this tip of the Island enabled the *Black Knight* prototype ballistic missiles to be fully tested without actually launching. Hugely strong gripping structures would hold the rockets in place while the kerosene and hydrogen peroxide fuelled engines blasted their exhaust over Scratchell's Bay. By the 1970s, the project to develop a UK designed delivery vehicle for a nuclear deterrent was scrapped in favour of buying American equipment, a government policy that seems to continue to this day, much to the bafflement and frustration of anyone with an interest in engineering. Perhaps the 'apogee' of the rocket testing site was the development of the *Black Arrow* system, which was successfully used to launch the *Prospero* satellite into orbit. At present this is the only British built satellite to be launched by a British built rocket. It is still transmitting radio signals to this day, and should orbit the earth for over a hundred more years. And you guessed it, as soon as *Prospero* was launched, the UK government cancelled the project in favour of Concorde. Apparently they could see no future in satellite based communications. Today this industry is worth about a quarter of a trillion dollars.

² Pronounced "Gooly-emo"

From Alum Bay we head East over the spectacular purple heather of Headon Warren to Totland Bay. Unlike the exciting surf of Compton, this is an often sheltered spot which is excellent for swimming around expensive motor-boats. A tree-lined grass terrace extends for about five hundred meters parallel to the bay, perfect for picnics. Above the beach is an aptly named restaurant called The Waterfront. A wonderful place to listen to live music while you contemplate a world class sunset and the gentle lapping of waves. Or, depending on your perspective on life, a wind-lashed near gazebo of a structure with parking that will test the nerve of overconfident recently qualified drivers.

A delightful section of the Isle of Wight coastal path takes you to past Colwell Bay, with its numerous identikit holiday apartments, past the blocky Fort Albert, to the former barracks of Fort Victoria. Much of this structure is in a state of disrepair, although it still contains an aquarium and a planetarium within its former gun emplacement arches. A further kilometer or two takes you to the perennially pretty harbour town of Yarmouth. It is exactly as its name suggests, and is a colourful abode of gleaming yachts, shops selling expensive deli-style food, shops selling even more expensive nauticalia, and expensive houses which shelter the wealthy patrons of these yachts and shops. My parents live a few kilometers east in a little rural village called Ningwood. Every week I would hitch an unfailingly exciting ride to First Yarmouth Sea Scouts in the sporty Saab owed by the Thomases, who owned the nearby dairy farm. I joined the Beavers when I was six, progressed to Cubs and then to Sea Scouts until I was fifteen. I owe so much to the Taplins, who so admirably ran these groups. I still regularly kayak on the Yar, but can no longer tie the special knot in our eminently practical triangular bandage necktie. I had a lot of badges.

At Yarmouth one can board the car ferry to Lymington, and from there the arboreal delights of the New Forest, and the rest of the Mainland, are easily accessible. It is better to bring a bicycle though, as the cost of a return car ticket is eye wateringly expensive. The slow, half hour crossing of the Solent is fabulous. If you do it, brave the elements and watch proceedings from the open sun deck. It is tranquility distilled, until the rocking of the ship sets the car alarms off.

Freshwater, and its coastal Totlandish environs, are my commendation as a Perfect Place. It attains much of its perfection by constant renewal by action of wind and sea. The water may not be drinkable, but these invigorating, kinetic shores are always fresh in a dynamic sense. They are alive and unstagnant. Perfection in human beauty is not to be found in bleached teeth, flawless skin-plastic, enrobed in beige. It requires a willingness to embellish a quirk and indulge in colour. It is also an embrace of the reality of time, and the ability to juxtapose heritage upon a transient present. In life's cocktail, a dash of wistful melancholia is required to fully accentuate the zest of now.

As Tennyson wrote:

“Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depths of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn fields, ... ”

and

“Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,... ”

Tennyson said: “Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers.”

I hope with all sincerity that this is your experience of Winchester this year.

“Hope
Smiles from the threshold of the year to come,
Whispering it will be happier...”

Thank you. Please stand.

AF. September 2017.