

# IN COMMEMORATION OF THE ORP BŁYSKAWICA

## Cowes Blitz Walk.



An artist's impression of ORP Błyskawica in action during the blitz on Cowes & East Cowes.

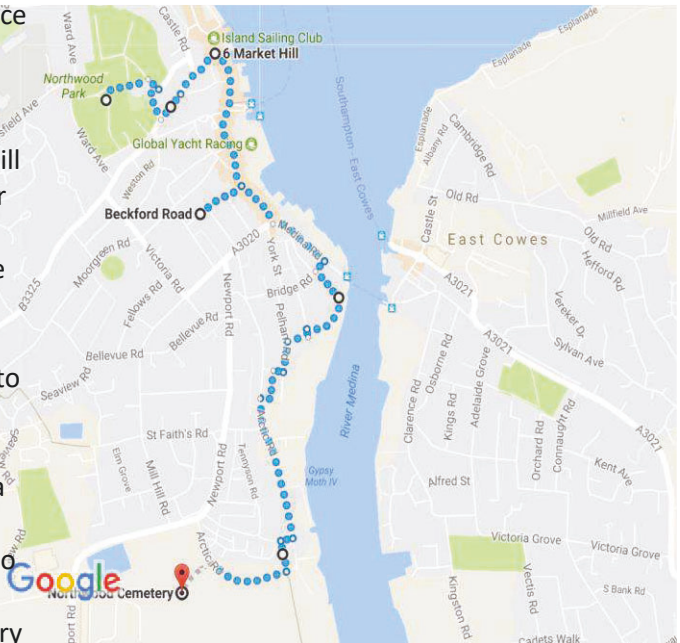


Forming part of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the defence of Cowes, this guided walk visits areas of the town affected by the terrible events of 4th/5<sup>th</sup> May 1942

This publication was collated and produced by John Nicholson from material contributed by Dave Jones (Cowes Heritage), Jeff Sechiari (Brewery history Society) & Geoff Banks (Błyskawica Society), May 2017

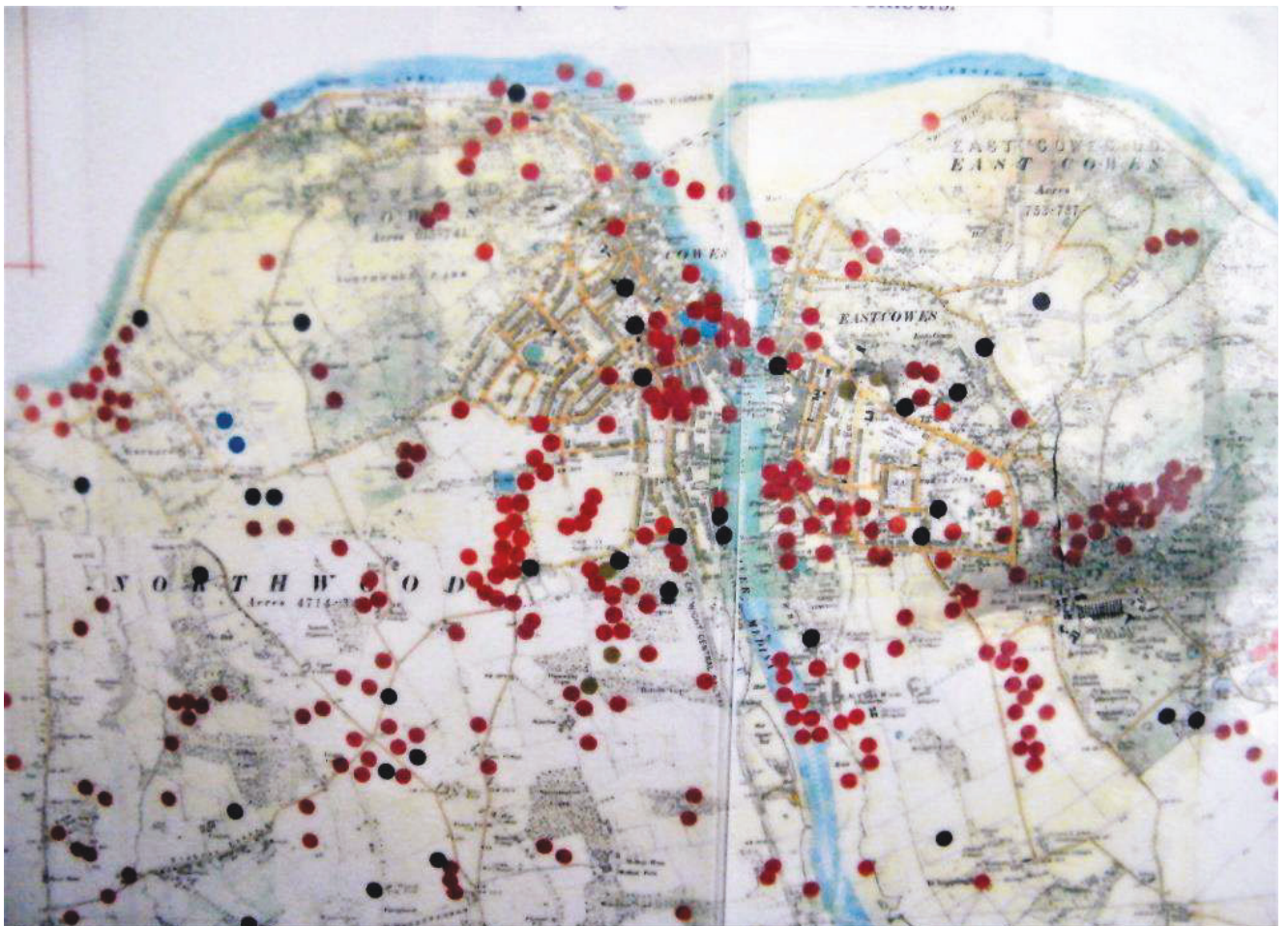
## The Walk Route

- The War Memorial, Northwood Park
- Past St Mary's Church (where the funeral service of those killed on the night was followed by a procession to Northwood Cemetery for interment in the mass grave)
- Continues along Union Rd and down Market Hill to the High St, the town square where the War Memorial originally stood until bombed
- Along High St to the Pier View Hotel one of the buildings that survived the bombing
- Continuing along the High Street up Shooters Hill, then doubling back to Francki Place, next to the Painters Arms and opposite the rear courtyard to the Anchor Inn
- Next past Cowes Library, where there landed a bomb that failed to explode
- Moving on down Medina Rd to the Bridge Rd to view what remains of S White's shipyard
- Then to the Mass grave in Northwood Cemetery



## Where the Bombs Fell

This map shows the bombs that dropped in Cowes & environs (not all during the night 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> May 1942) Note that a majority fell on sparsely or uninhabited areas. The bombers were forced to fly higher by the fierce defensive fire from ORP Błyskawica.



## Starting point - Cowes War Memorial Northwood Park

Originally standing in Cowes High St at the junction with Market Hill (see below ) This memorial, paid for by public subscription, held bronze plaques (subsequently lost) containing the names of 133 local men who lost their lives serving their country during the First World War. It was unveiled on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1921 by Major General "Jack" Seeley (featured with his horse Warrior in the recent "Warhorse" film & stage play).

The dedication was by Rev. Miles Berkeley vicar of Holy Trinity Church.

Broken by the blast of a nearby bomb during the 1942 blitz it was moved from the High St square to its present position. It was deliberately left in its broken state as a poignant reminder of lives lost. The plaques lying on either side of the plinth record the local men who made the ultimate sacrifice serving their country in two World Wars. Large numbers assemble here on Remembrance Sunday to remember those lost in conflict since the First World War.



The 30<sup>th</sup> March 1921 unveiling of the War Memorial and dedication service was witnessed by a large crowd. It stood for twenty years, until the fateful night in May 1942, as a focal point in memory of the many Cowes men who died in the Great War.

### St Mary's Church

Although it escaped the bombing, as the parish church it played a crucial role in providing comfort during the dark days of war This Grade II listed building contains several plaques dedicated to loved ones lost during conflict including a listed roll of honour commemorating WW1.

### The Rose Garden

This pleasant and distinctive rose garden, part of Northwood House estate and park, is to be dedicated to commemorating WWI, by Cowes Town Council, with a three-path layout radiating from a circular area with seating, featuring a monument at its centre.

### Union Road & Market Hill

As evidenced by the historic and listed building in the area of Union Road and upper reaches of Market Hill, this area was spared the worst effects of the bombing, Note the striking ex undertaker's building, named after the famous Carrera marble, the Grade II listed Vernon House and neighbouring Union House, and the fire insurance plaque on No7 Union Road and, as we go down Market Hill, the Prince Regent, a busy wartime pub that only closed in the 1970's, and the historic row of Ward Cottages and the McNamara Alms-houses behind on the left-hand-side.

### Market Hill /High St Junction

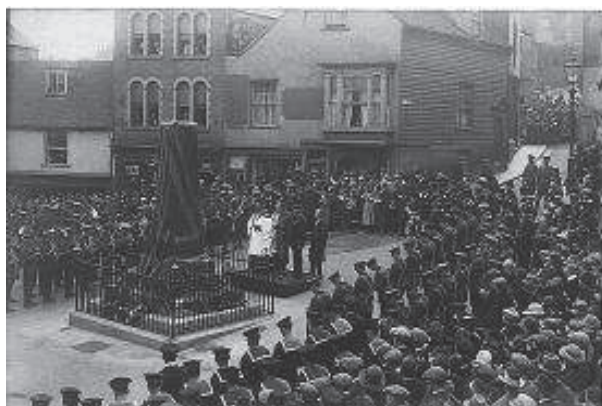
A huge high explosive bomb landed here on the night 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> May 1942. It destroyed the George Hotel and many nearby

properties were severely damaged including the old Town Hall.

These pictures show damage inflicted on the night as well views of the area taken pre-and post-war.

The George Hotel and former Town Hall. This whole area was demolished. The present day 1960s flats have replaced them.

The damaged War Memorial can be seen on the right (below/ next page).



In this picture the area has been tidied up and the War Memorial has yet to be moved. The building on the right belonging to Neal's the Printer's collapsed after the war in 1946. The only casualty was bricklayer, Les Smith's pushbike which was crushed. He uttered a few choice words as it was almost a new machine and he received no compensation.



Bottom of Market Hill pre-war (1930s) Note the War Memorial and three-story Hewitt's shop next to the Post Office and the sloping roof building behind the two ladies on the right.

Nineteen Fifties; The Post Office has survived but Hewitt's

is now single story, the War Memorial has gone and the old sloped roof buildings on the right are missing.

### The Wartime Parade

The Royal Yacht Squadron and Osborne Court, both served important functions during the war, as part of HMS Vectis. Osborne Court was used for forces accommodation whilst the Squadron played a key part in operation J, in the supervision of the D-Day landings.



### The Prospect, Max Aitkin Museum

This magnificent 18th Century, Ratsey and Laphorn sailmaker's loft, was acquired and restored by Sir Max Aitken in 1947 a celebrated yachtsman and WWII air force pilot, who fought in the Battle of Britain, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Flying Cross and was Knighted in the 1940s. Today, with its traditional splendour, the building hosts Sir Max's personal collection of historic and nautical artefacts.



### Cowes High Street - between the Pier View and Hursts

This image taken from a press photo captures the aftermath of the raid. The shops on the left and Hurst's (then Timothy White's) escaped relatively unscathed, however the block on the right sustained a direct hit. Of the block contained by the High St, Carvel Lane and Terminus Rd only the Pier View survived. Post-war Oliver's moved elsewhere in the High St before closing. The frontage of T M Taylor & Sons, long established family jewellers, was protected by the metal shutters.



## Cowes Pontoon and Railway Station



The pontoon ferry terminal and the nearby Cowes railway station, across, at the present site of M&S, served as an important wartime transport and communication route.



## The Southern High Street and Shooters Hill



This end of the High Street escaped the worst of the ravages of the bombing, and, although, today, the wonderfully striking façade to the former Browns stores, now Sainsburys, has not been preserved, that of Joliffes, further up the hill can still be enjoyed.



## Francki Place (Town Square – outside the Painters Arms)

Named after Captain Wojciech Francki PN, DSC. Commander of the Polish destroyer ORP Blyskawica (lightning) built in the

shipyard of JS. white, Cowes in 1936. On the night of 4th/5th may 1942 whilst ORP Blyskawica was in Cowes for repairs. Captain Francki, of his own volition, ordered his ship to remain armed to defend Cowes in anticipation of an enemy attack. The initiative and leadership of Captain Francki enabled the brave Polish crew to repel The Luftwaffe's intensive aerial attack throughout the night.

## The Painters and Isle of Wight Garlic

During the Second World War, a squadron of French torpedo boats was stationed in Cowes. They often complained to Bill, the landlord of The Painters Arms, how much they missed French garlic. He spoke to his RAF pilot friends who were carrying out night missions to Central France and on one of their sorties, they brought back a sack of Auvergne garlic. Bill began growing it and also gave some to his neighbour, Mrs Boswell. She grew garlic in her kitchen garden at Mersley Farm, now the site of the 40-acre Garlic Farm.



## Spencer Rigging

Now the base of the world-renowned rigging firm, during the war the building was used for, both, bus storage and as an auxiliary fire station.

## Cowes Library Beckford Rd



Unexploded bomb! Not something you want outside your front door. Just how close was Cowes to losing its Library?

Whether the bomb is still in the crater is unclear; there is certainly a relaxed air about the disposal squad in these two pictures.



## Medina Rd

This photo shows the corner of Medina Rd and Bridge Rd. Post-war the two damaged buildings were acquired by J S White's as additional office space. This area behind these buildings was the focal point of the events of 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> May 1942. White's shipyards on both sides of the Medina were primary targets, while ORP Błyskawica whose actions were crucial in the defence of Cowes was moored in the river.



As were these Free French Chasseur vessels whose guns were also active on the night. One French sailor died in action.



There were many heroes & heroines that fateful night. A Błyskawica crew member recalled the courage & determination of the firemen who worked throughout the raid, putting out fires & pulling people from burning buildings whilst the bombs were

falling around them. Others included the men of the bomb disposal units who made safe the numerous unexploded bombs & time bombs dropped on the town, the men & women of the Cowes Civil Defence including the ARP Wardens & Ambulance drivers, the Police & Home Guard, British Red Cross, St John's Ambulance Brigade & the men of the Floating Bridge who braving the German bombers keeping the essential communication open.



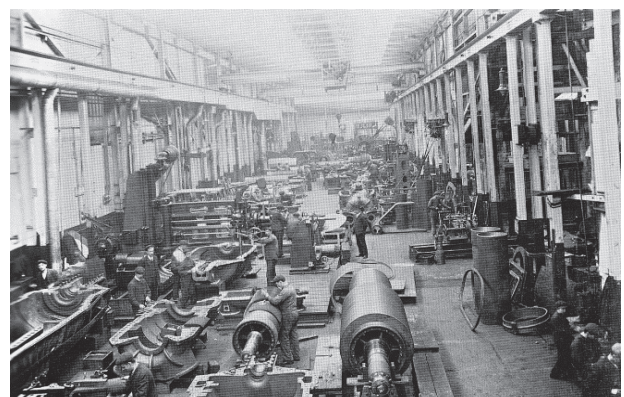
*(Label:- one from the Medina Brewery)*

## J Samuel White's Shipyard



The Turbine Shop and general view of the yard and crane show why Cowes was a target for the Luftwaffe.

Post-war events have caused more damage to this once thriving shipbuilding site than Hitler's bombs. Only the listed Hammerhead Crane and Offices are likely to remain once redevelopment of the site takes place. Unfortunately, access is limited.



Dornier Do-17 Flying Pencils were the principal

bombers used on the raid.

Cup Winners- A group of White's firefighting team pose with Managing Director James Milne.

Fire fighters, ARP Wardens, Ambulance Drivers (often women volunteers), and the local Home Guard all played their part in the defence of Cowes.



## Mill Hill Station

Now Arctic Park. This station served the industrial settlement around the JS Whites Shipyard. The entrance to the tunnel that goes through to St Mary's Rd is still visible.



## Arctic Rd

Walking up Bridge Rd take the third turning on the left; the maisonettes on the left-hand side have replaced the houses (below) damaged on the night. Arctic Rd one of the residential

streets hit during the raid. It was in houses such as these that personal tragedy with loss of life and injury occurred. This picture captures the impact of bombs dropped at random on the civilian population. Every house was home to a family; young or old everyone was affected.

## The Dry Dock, Arctic Rd.

Coles Yard a grade II listed shipyard. Yacht building and fitting yard. Constructed by George Henry Marvin in 1885. Note the Engine chimney of stock brick, square in section about 50 feet high, this is attached to a stone segmental arch with stock brick voussoirs, the arch 2 C19 industrial windows and unloading doors. Attached to the arch is the slipway constructed of local stone blocks with **4 steps at each shore end and flights** of 13 steps two thirds of



the way along ending in a wooden pier each side with mainly chamfered concrete supports. The floor of the dock is made of large concrete slabs on which lie three railway tracks to support the cradles. At the end of the C19 this was probably the single largest yacht building and fitting enterprise in Britain, its importance shown by its work on King George V's racing cutter "Britannia". In World War I the slipway was used to convert large yachts and pleasure boats into patrol boats. In World War II Coles Yard was the base for Free French naval patrol boats.

## Northwood Cemetery

A walk up Newport Rd brings us to Northwood Cemetery where victims of the raid are buried in a communal grave. Also buried or remembered in the Cemetery are servicemen who gave their lives in defence of their country.

The recently restored Mass Grave, here 27 victims of the Blitz are interred, with another 4 recorded but interred elsewhere.

During the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event Polish sailors paid tribute at the Mass Grave.

Adrian Searle's book ('Isle of Wight at War 1939-1945'



published by the Dovecote Press) captures the mood of the sombre mass funeral "a long procession made its way from Cowes on the wet afternoon of Tuesday 12th May to Northwood Cemetery. As it did so, the final indignity was inflicted on the mourning town. The Air Raid siren, which had heralded a night of so much suffering a week earlier, wailed out its chilling warning. Gunfire was heard in the distance but Cowes was not prepared to be mocked in this way; the procession kept moving and the alert passed".

This book describes how Union Flag draped coffins, borne on lorries, had to pass huge bomb craters as the procession, which included civic dignitaries and representatives from the wartime services, made its way from the cemetery gates to the communal grave. ARP wardens acted as bearers for all the coffins except one; that was of a cub scout. His cap and neckerchief were placed on his coffin which was carried by senior members of the scout troop.

## **The Blitz in Cowes**

It was on the night of 4th and 5th May that we had the worst air raids. When the siren went at about 8 o'clock in the evening everybody went out to the shelters. My mother was taken out and covered up as she had been very ill. There were a lot of neighbours with us as not every house had a shelter in the garden. They were built in about every fourth garden. Then came the two dogs and two cats that hid under the seats, poor things.

The raid started at about 9 o'clock. There were two Polish gun boats in J S Whites for repairs and it was a good job they were there as they were firing their guns at the planes and everybody says that they saved Cowes that night. Harry (my husband) was on fire watch at the pontoon that night. We thought the firing and bombing had stopped and when the all clear went at 11 o'clock he checked up on us and then went back to the pontoon and he had only just got back when the siren went again and the bombs and gun firing started again.

In this raid a blast bomb went off near our houses. May had a heart condition and was so frightened during this raid that she had a heart attack and died. Sally and Alan were also killed with the force of the blast and Frank who was stood near the doorway to protect his family was cut all over. He was taken up to Parkhurst Army Hospital but did not last long. All they gave us back was his purse with about four shillings and sixpence in it and his pocket watch as they had to cut his clothes out of his body.

Stella was taken to a house in Newport Road and when I found her there she was asleep so I left her there until morning. Hazel was taken down to Cross Street School and it was about 9 o'clock in the morning before I found her and picked her up. She was very upset because she could not go anywhere. She was covered with blood all over her clothes where she was near her father and he was the one who was cut all over.

The next day my mother and father took Stella and Hazel and my sister Molly with her baby to my other sister's at Ventnor. I was left behind waiting for unexploded bombs to go off in the cemetery and the fields behind us. Bill, Harry and I went to stay at my brother's house as ours had no roof and all the windows had been broken. The furniture and possessions that had not been stolen were put into store and the worst thing I had to do was to have the two dogs and two cats put to sleep.

Stella was four years old when her mother, father, brother and sister were killed and Hazel was nine years old. Stella was the one who was affected most by the air raids. She could always feel her mouth filled up with little stones and had bad nights for months after it was over and sometimes she could not eat anything for about two weeks.

For two days we could not find out what had happened to Alan and his little sister Sally but on the third afternoon a Vicar from St. Faith's Church came up to my brother's house where we were stopping and took Bill and Harry up to Northwood House as there were some bodies of unidentified children there. They advised me not to go but Bill and Harry said they looked just as if they were asleep together.

All the funerals were on the same day. We all met up in Ward Avenue. There were about ten lorries to carry the coffins as every family concerned had lost at least two or three members. A family of three went first and then my brother's family of four were second in the procession and the rest followed. All the surviving



members of the families walked behind the lorries. We had a Mew and Langtons lorry as my father and my brother Bill worked for them.

As the procession started off there was misty rain falling and although there were planes flying around we got to the cemetery wet but without mishap.

We were glad to get the funerals over. The coffins were buried in a long line and a monument was later erected with the names of all those who were killed on the night of 4th/5th May 1942.