

The Maritime Isle

Vision

Reconnecting Cowes
maritime heritage with public life

This brochure invites you to embark with us on a journey with the ultimate destination of creating a significant maritime activity centre in Cowes.

The site, the collection and the visionary text is designed to inspire discussion among the public, stakeholders and potential funders of Maritime Isle.

It leads us on to the next stage – seeking funding to develop architectural drawings and a detailed business plan.

Our vision

Maritime Isle will become, under the aegis of the Classic Boat Museum, a working maritime heritage yard for Cowes: part museum, part skills workshop, part waterfront attraction, part community place, part events destination, and part living demonstration of the Island's continuing relationship with the sea.



Cover photo: Nick Coleman



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Why create Maritime Isle?

We believe the Classic Boat Museum can move beyond its current circumstances to become the anchor of a larger, more resilient maritime heritage destination in the Medina Village (the former J.S. White Engineering Yard) in West Cowes. Having tested the site opportunity, audience case, business model, and legal questions surrounding the Hammerhead Crane, we have confirmed that this distinctive opportunity is worth pursuing with seriousness and ambition.

Maritime Isle is not conceived as a conventional museum slotted into a development site; it will be shaped as a working maritime heritage yard where Cowes shipbuilding, yachting, design, engineering, and restoration skills are made visible again.

At the heart of this future lies the Hammerhead Crane.

The project will recover the historic power of place in the Medina Village — where ships and engines were built, repaired, and launched — and reconnect it with public life. Its meaning lies in its surviving sheds, quayside, crane, workshop spaces, and industrial scale.







Maritime Isle will preserve both material assets and intangible cultural heritage, expanding its archive to document the untold stories of the people who made Cowes world famous.

Ultimately, it will use this heritage to inspire skills, training, and job opportunities for young people and the wider Island community.

Key questions

To evaluate this project, we asked ourselves several key questions:

- Can the Medina Village dockyard site and Hammerhead Crane provide a suitable physical site for a maritime museum, public attraction, and activity centre?
- Can the legal, regulatory, ownership, and liability issues surrounding the site and crane be sufficiently understood to identify a practical way forward?
- Is there sufficient cultural, community, educational, and economic value to justify taking the project into a more developed phase?
- Can a credible outline business case be made, including capital funding, revenue generation, operational costs, and future governance?

Our ambition extends beyond finding better accommodation for the Classic Boat Museum. We aim to integrate the crane, shipyard fabric, river frontage, and surrounding maritime businesses into a single destination of regional and national importance.





What we discovered

Our scoping study – ‘Maritime Isle delivered by the Classic Boat Museum’ – was funded by the Arts Council of England, with match funding from Cowes Town Council, the Cowes Harbour Commission, and the museum’s own reserves. The study confirms that the opportunity is highly credible. The Classic Boat Museum possesses a strong collection rooted in the maritime, industrial, and social history of the Isle of Wight. However, its present facilities are inadequate for the scale of the collection, and its public offer is constrained by poor visibility, limited opening times, modest facilities, and an absence of paid professional staff.



What visitors want

Audience development research – including online surveys, focus groups, and comparator research – confirmed that audiences respond strongly to authenticity, real boats, visible conservation, skilled people, and active engagement. Maritime Isle cannot succeed as a traditional, passive museum. Visitors, families, schools, and community groups want orientation, interaction, tours, events, a café, a shop, learning spaces, and accessible facilities. People expect high-quality collection displays alongside opportunities to participate and feel a sense of belonging.







What our business plan shows

Our work demonstrates that this vision is entirely achievable, provided the attraction reaches a stronger visitor base and builds a diversified income model spanning admissions, catering, retail, parking, events, hires, moorings, and boat trips. Because Maritime Isle is orders of magnitude greater than the current museum, its success depends on significant visitor numbers, strong secondary spend, and complex operations that require more detailed validation.

The scoping project has tested our ambitions against audience needs, legal complexities, business-model realism, and organisational capacity. The lesson is not that Maritime Isle is already solved, but that the project is sufficiently strong to justify a disciplined next phase to build a stronger evidence base and understand risks before making major capital commitments. The work has sharpened our focus away from a conventional museum and towards a working maritime heritage and activities centre.

Why a destination maritime activity centre in Cowes?

Cowes maritime heritage is of national and international importance. The Solent became the birthplace of global yacht racing owing to its challenging complex double tides. Since the 17th Century it has been a significant location for specialised shipbuilding owing to its unique natural advantages, including protected deep anchorages. In its early 20th Century heyday, the J.S. White shipyards employed 4,000 people, constructing vessels for the Royal Navy and international fleets.

The proposition is not simply a new home for the museum, but the recovery of Cowes working maritime heritage as a public place of learning, memory, enterprise, and enjoyment. Maritime Isle aims to become one of the Isle of Wight's recognised heritage destinations by offering a unique, active asset that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Success will be measured by visitor numbers alongside public access, skills training, community pride, and long-term resilience.



Photo: David Goddard via Getty Images





The distinctiveness of Maritime Isle lies in the fact that the site itself is the exhibit. The visitor experience will grow directly out of the existing industrial fabric, conserving surviving buildings while keeping new interventions purposeful, legible, and subordinate to the yard's character. Visitors will feel they have entered a place that still works. The crane dominates the skyline, the river forms part of the narrative, and the buildings will retain their authentic patina of age.

The five pillars of Maritime Isle



The crane as landmark, experience and catalyst

The Grade II* listed Hammerhead Crane is currently on Historic England's 'Heritage at Risk' list. It is our 'hero asset' – the primary structure capable of communicating scale, drama, and ambition. The crane will become the emblem of Maritime Isle, visible across the river, lit as a landmark, and interpreted as an engineering marvel.

While public access will depend on structural, safety, and consent resolutions, our vision is intentionally bold. At a minimum, visitors will gather beneath it and experience it as the site's defining symbol. Subject to feasibility testing, it will support exceptional experiences such as guided high-level viewing, hospitality, and special events. Defining its specific role in driving visitor numbers and income is a priority for the next phase of business planning to justify major capital investment.



The J.S. White Engineering Yard as museum

Maritime Isle will treat the former engineering yard itself as the primary exhibit. The historic sheds, working surfaces, rail tracks, waterfront, crane, slipways, boundaries, views, routes and surviving industrial fragments will not be tidied away into blandness. They are what make the place different from a museum that could be built anywhere. The surviving evidence of the former J. S. White engineering yard will be treated as interpretative material in its own right. It is the physical memory of Cowes industrial maritime achievement.

We need to conserve, repair and adapt its working fabric in ways that allow visitors to experience the authenticity of the place. We will avoid unnecessary new build where existing structures can be made to work. New construction may be necessary for welcome, access, learning, servicing, collections care or commercial use, but it will support the historic yard rather than dominate it. Often existing facades and exterior surfaces can be retained on buildings otherwise modernised underneath.

The strongest version of Maritime Isle is not a museum beside a crane. It is a maritime heritage site in which all the elements form one coherent experience.

The boats as a living collection

The Classic Boat Museum's collection is central to the project, but its future power lies in being seen as a living collection as well as a static assembly of vessels. The boats will be interpreted through people, use, design, speed, danger, repair competition, wartime service, local pride and skilled making.

A successful Maritime Isle will not simply display boats. It will show why boats matter, how they were made, who made them, who used them, how they changed lives, and how maritime skills can still shape futures.

The collection connects classic yachts and dinghies, powerboat racing, lifeboats, naval shipbuilding, flying boats, hovercraft, modern racing technology and the working river, to the people who invented, built and sailed on them. It will examine the work of Uffa Fox, Charles Sibbick, Ian Proctor, Frank Giles and Sonny Levi.

The collection showcases the fascinating contribution of maritime women, so often overlooked, from the unnamed welders and workers in the J.S. White drawing office, to famous names – Blanche Coules Thornycroft (hull design), Joe Carstairs, ('the fastest women on the water') and racing heroes such as record-breaking circumnavigator Ellen MacArthur and double Olympic Gold Medal Winner, Shirley Robertson.

The visitor experience will include strong displays, but also visible storage, restoration, step-aboard moments, guided tours, conservation workshops, design demonstrations, schools work, volunteer activity and boatbuilding skills. The audience evidence supports this direction: visitors want structured interpretation, real artefacts, knowledgeable people, interaction and visible conservation.



Skills, making and conservation in action

The collection connects older maritime traditions with contemporary marine skills, electronics, sustainability, materials and future careers.

Maritime Isle will put 'work' at the centre of the visitor experience. Cowes maritime history is not only a story of famous vessels and celebrated designers. It is a story of skilled labour, workshops, apprenticeships, trades, materials, repair, experiment and practical intelligence. Maritime Isle will recover that sense of making as a public experience.

Boat conservation, restoration, traditional craft skills, marine engineering, digital design, model testing and learning programmes are all be part of the offer. The museum already has foundations in education, community activity and boatbuilding. The future project will scale this up into a visible programme that links heritage with training, volunteering, wellbeing, youth engagement and local pride. It will become a place where the Island's maritime past is used to invest in its maritime future.

Clear conservation standards and conservation planning, following the National Historic Ships Guidelines, will help the Museum move beyond an undifferentiated approach to restoration and display, allowing different boats to be interpreted in different ways – some conserved as evidence, some restored for use, some displayed for design significance, and some used to explain restoration, materials and maritime skills.



Resilient waterfront business model

Maritime Isle's financial success depends on a realistic, diversified business model. The project leverages its unique waterfront location, historic character, and live maritime activity to generate revenue from multiple streams. These encompass admissions, retail, hospitality, parking, educational courses, boat trips, moorings, and commercial leases.

Whilst a multi-faceted revenue model creates significant opportunity, managing a complex site with overlapping museum, retail, and marine operations presents a notable risk. The next development phase will focus on operational viability. Every major commercial and physical component must be stress-tested to ensure the organisation can run them safely, consistently, and profitably. Each stream will be evaluated against operating capacity and risk, net financial contribution, public benefit and alignment with charitable purposes.

The project features an ambitious vision executed through a coherently phased delivery model. Maritime Isle will launch with a focused, achievable core offering. Subsequent expansion will scale systematically through proven income streams, stronger governance, expanded staff capacity, strategic partnerships, and targeted future investment.

The strategy draws insight from successful international peers that animate working heritage rather than simply displaying it. Key benchmarks include the Black Country Living Museum with its immersive historical experiences, Mystic Seaport, a waterfront specialising in craft and vessel culture and Port-Musée Douarnenez, showing strong integration between boats, the harbour and the community.

The opportunity in Cowes is highly distinctive. The site integrates an existing collection, specialised heritage infrastructure, active maritime businesses, and a deep-rooted Island sailing culture.

Imagining Maritime Isle

It will be a place of visitor journey, surprise and activity. People will visit and immediately feel they are somewhere real. They will see the crane, the river, boats, historic sheds, working spaces and people at work. They will be welcomed clearly, oriented confidently, and invited into a sequence of experiences that moves from the scale of the yard to the detail of the boats, from the history of J. S. White to the lives of workers, designers, sailors, engineers, families and communities.

In time, the visitor journey will also extend onto the water. Pontoons for visiting classic vessels, heritage river trips, better connections from the Red Jet and town centre, and the possible use of operational museum vessels such as Vigia and Rosabelle will turn Maritime Isle into a waterfront experience not a museum beside the river.

These opportunities will be tested carefully. The audience development work shows that barriers include low awareness, cost, access, an unclear offer, poor facilities and the perception that sailing and maritime culture may not be everyone. Maritime Isle must dismantle those barriers not only through marketing, but through the nature of the experience itself. It must feel open, active, understandable and rooted in Island life.







Maritime Isle could be a place for:

- Tourists who want a memorable waterfront destination
- Visitors who want a distinctive Isle of Wight experience
- Families who want activity, stories and things to do
- Schools who want curriculum-linked learning in a real place
- Local people who want pride, memory and participation
- Volunteers who want purpose and belonging
- Young people who want skills and opportunities
- Maritime specialists who want depth and authenticity
- Event audiences who may first come for atmosphere, food, music, talks or festivals, and then discover the heritage

The relationship with Cowes and the wider Island

Maritime Isle will become the beating heart of Cowes in which this hitherto derelict site will be a destination of excitement, curiosity, activity and learning. It has the potential to connect the town centre, the river, working marine industries, local schools, UKSA, Cowes Harbour Commission, cultural organisations, artists, makers, tourism partners and community groups. It is part of the wider cultural and regeneration agenda, promoting inclusivity, resilience, education, tourism and economic benefit.

We see our project as a series of partnership propositions, not simply a museum expansion. Its success will depend on relationships: with the site owner, with existing marine businesses, with funders, with schools and colleges, with community groups, with tourism partners, and with the people of Cowes. A special relationship is being forged with the local authorities, the Cowes Harbour Commission, the National Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic England.

Emerging conversations with organisations such as the Boat Building Academy at Lyme Regis, Ratsey & Lapthorn in Cowes, CECAM in East Cowes and UKSA suggest the breadth of partnership that could be developed. The next phase will turn this goodwill into a clearer partnership map – which organisations might provide training, who might support skills and employment pathways, who might animate the site, and who might help connect young people to sailing, boatbuilding and the sea.







The future site will feel alive: a place of festivals, boat gatherings, evening events, heritage river trips, talks, artists, conservation, demonstrations, and perhaps markets, food, music and public waterfront use.

Not all of this needs to happen at once, but the Medina Village could become one of the places where the Island tells a story of itself.

Next steps

Our Arts Council England-funded work has identified the key risks that must now be managed. The next stage is a focused development phase designed to turn this promising concept into a fundable project, concentrating on seven priorities:

1 Securing a viable tenure or partnership structure for the crane, key buildings, and site

2 Defining crane conservation, access, interpretation, and income streams

3 Drawing up a detailed Conservation Management Plan and refining the capital scope around adaptive reuse

4 Preparing a credible route toward major funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and private sources

5 Establishing a realistic, phased operating model

6 Testing moorings, parking, events, and hospitality assumptions

7 Strengthening governance, staffing, and delivery capacity







Acquisition of the site could unlock substantial public investment if the crane, heritage sheds, and former J.S. White offices are secured for long-term public use. Before making major capital commitments, the trustees require five specific tests to be met:

1 Secure or securable tenure

2 An understood, fundable crane conservation strategy

3 A capital scope proportionate to likely funding

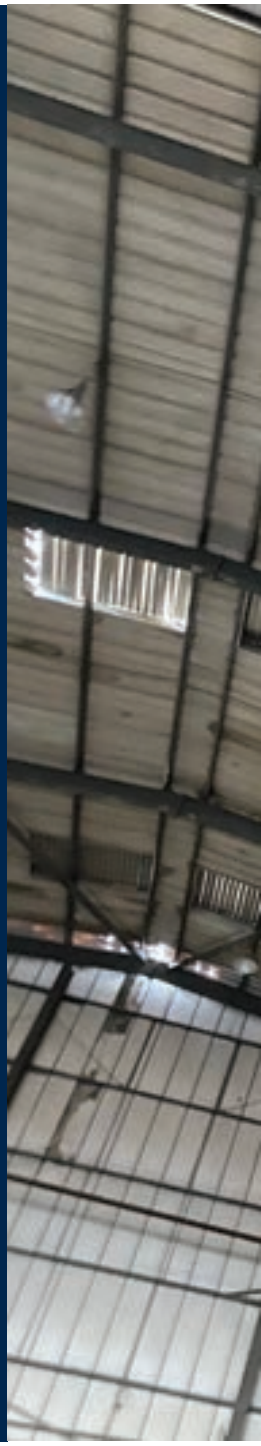
4 An operating model that works under conservative visitor and income assumptions

5 A governance, volunteer, and staffing plan capable of managing increased scale and risk

Maritime Isle is no longer just an aspiration; the site, collection, crane, and audience evidence justify further investment to realise a distinctive, sustainable heritage destination. The prize is large, the risks are visible, and the future lies in a bold ambition that makes the most of what already exists.

The project will be shaped by a single guiding idea:

Reconnecting Cowes maritime heritage with public life — conserving the Hammerhead Crane, the former J.S. White Engineering Yard, animating the Classic Boat Museum's collections, supporting skills and learning, and creating a resilient waterfront destination rooted in the Island's past, present and future.





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