

St Catherine's Point

Summary Description

The dramatic coastal area which includes St Catherine's point marks the most southerly tip of the Isle of Wight. The lighthouse marking the point is a prominent visual feature of the area, particularly to sailors, however, this feature has not prevented a large number of ships being wrecked in the area in the past.

Sea Surface

The sea surface area is designated as a caution area due to its numerous navigational hazards. Activity on the sea surface closer to shore is dominated by commercial fishing and features such as navigation markers, smaller boats and yachts frequently traverse this area. To the south of this area larger vessels can be seen using the deeper water further offshore.

Seabed Surface

The main modern impact is the feature in the area is the explosives dumping area. There are 43 wrecks and obstructions charted, with many more recorded casualties. At least 20 of these wrecks are used for recreational diving. Prominent examples include the *Asborg*, the remains of a cargo steamer sunk 1918 and the *Ashanti* a cargo ship which had been requisitioned as a support ship for the D-Day landing that was sunk by a torpedo. Less commonly dived, but recently investigated the wreck of *SS Mendi*, sunk on the 27th February 1917, lies within this area. Built as a steam driven cargo ship it was utilised during the war, the legacy of which provides a strong link to South Africa.

Seabed features such as extensive sandbanks, cliff terraces and variable seabed depths pose a real navigational hazard, and have contributed to the high number of wrecking incidents. Well known seamarks include Jeremy Rock and Rocken End.

Seabed Subsurface

The main modern impact is the feature of the explosives dumping area. While no further seabed subsurface features are recorded, it should be highlighted that recent research into the development of the English Channel is beginning to reveal evidence for the potential for survival of submerged prehistoric landscape deposits within the seabed from times of lower sea level, some of which could be located in this area.

Coastal

The coastal area stretches from Walpen Chine on the western side, through Blackgang Chine, Niton Undercliffe, to Binnel Point. Landmarks include Smugglers Rock at Niton Undercliffe and the prominent St Catherine's lighthouse. The lighthouse is one of the many iconic features along the Solent coast. It is open to the public at the discretion of the keeper. The present lighthouse was first lit in 1840. The elegant 120ft tower was affected by fog and so was reduced to the present height of 86ft in 1875. The range of the 2 x 400w MBI lamps is 26 sea miles and they give one white flash every 5 seconds. It is maintained and controlled by Trinity House Lighthouse Service.

On St Catherine's Hill (780ft summit), stands an unusual octagonal tower known as the 'Pepper Pot'. It is the relic of an old lighthouse built around 1323 by a local landowner, Walter de Godeston, as an act of penance for having receiving casks of wine looted from a wrecked ship. A second circular lighthouse was begun near the tower in 1785, but never completed; its base still stands today. The new lighthouse, on the coast near St. Catherine's Point, was built in 1838.

Named after a local band of smugglers, Blackgang Chine, has now been overlaid by a fantasy theme park. Chine's top is 400ft above the sea, providing superb view of the cliffs leading north west past Whale Chine. The rocks along the base of these cliffs have claimed 180 ships since 1750. At the base of the cliffs can be seen the Gault clay, locally known as 'blue slipper', which acts as a lubricant to the overlying layers causing continual cliff falls along this coast. Blackgang Chine shows many signs of the slippage, which in recent years has taken away the original coast road and many houses.

Bathing is dangerous nr headland, but walks of the National trust's Knowles Farm area offer breathtaking sea views. Paths cross the landslip area below the cliff, and the main coastal path passes along the cliff top.

Archaeological Potential

This area must be considered of high potential for historic shipwreck remains. There is also potential for the discovery of remnants of submerged prehistoric landscapes and terrestrial archaeology which has eroded from the coast. There is also the potential to encounter the remains of crashed aircraft on the seabed, many of which are Second World War losses.

References

Pritchard, Martin and Kendall McDonald, 2001. *Dive Wight and Hampshire: A Diver Guide*: Middlesex, Underwater World Publishing Ltd.

Links

St Catherine's Lighthouse - <http://www.isleofwightattractions.co.uk/StCatherinesLighthouse.htm>

English Heritage: St Catherine's Oratory - http://pastscape.english-heritage.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=459794

Isle of Wight Historic Postcards: Niton to St Lawrence - http://www.back-of-the-wight.shalfleet.net/st_lawrence.htm

SS Mendi—www.wessexarch.co.uk/projects/marine/eh/ssmendi/index.php



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**National Oceanography
Centre, Southampton**
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Images



Reference:	HWTMA Archive
Character Area	St Catherine' Point
Description	Beach at St Catherine's Point
Photographer:	Stone
Date Photographed:	September 2006



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Photographer:	Mr Richard Telford-Bailie
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