

# Ship shape

Rather than follow in the Victorian-style footsteps of its founders, the Royal Yacht Squadron's new pavilion draws instead on architectural traditions, and makes them work for this special spot in Cowes.

by Jeremy Melvin



IF THE ISLE OF WIGHT'S ARCHITECTURE WERE as rich as its geology, it would be crawling with students from the Bartlett and the AA. Its built heritage is rather more ordinary – even flouting Peter Cook's dictum that the British like Modernism in maritime locations. For the yachting fraternity, though, it is a Mecca. The Solent's four daily tides make for challenging sailing conditions, which was what first attracted the Royal Yacht Squadron, progenitors of yacht racing, to its site on the Cowes waterfront. From this commanding position it oversees the festivities of Cowes Week every August, firing the cannon which starts the races, with a private pier to give privileged access to its members and 'officers in the service of Her Majesty'.

It is primarily for such occasions – during which the main building, 'the castle', overflows on to the adjacent lawns – that the squadron wanted a permanent pavilion rather than a marquee. It turned to Tom Croft, with a brief requiring the new pavilion to also operate as a function suite throughout the year, leaving the castle to its existence for much of the time as an agreeable country house hotel with a more formal atmosphere than the pavilion. 'The season was getting longer,' says John Power (RYS member and client representative), 'and we are increasingly holding large international regattas with receptions for up to 750 people.'

Croft's elegant little pavilion is less exuberant than some of the seaside architecture which Peter Cook enjoys, but it is still a breath of Modernist sensibility. The RYS itself presents a nice aesthetic dichotomy. Membership is limited to 'gentlemen actively interested in yachting' – although a naval commission, a few bob and a handle might help, it's in essence a club around a single interest. And where its members know their binnacles from their spinnakers, they're probably less sure of their Dorics and DPCs. While sailing imagery is not unheard of in architecture, the clubhouse – originally one of Henry VIII's defensive forts rebuilt and extended in the 1850s by Anthony Salvin – is Victorian in its luxury. It has enough plush upholstery, reassuringly dark and heavy furniture, and trophies to sink, if not a battleship, at least many of the 10-ton yachts which were the passport to entry. In the 1890s it spawned an extension for Queen Victoria's visit – technically not part of the clubhouse: a woman, you know – and in 1964 'the balcony', in 'Festival of Britain style'.

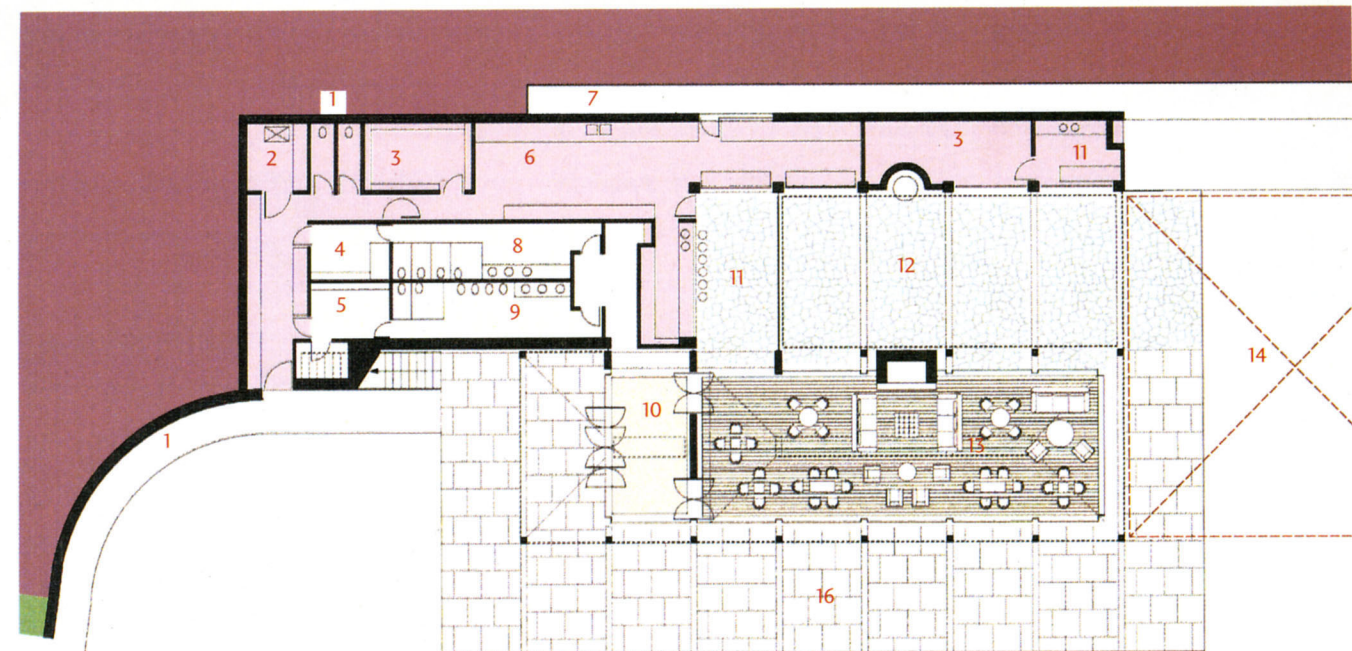
Croft's design neatly updates the festivities with a discipline many miles from that practised by the first commodore, the Earl of Yarborough, whose crews enthusiastically retained the cat'o'nine tails on their master's yachts. Taking a cue from the circular shape of the towers, Croft establishes an armature which leads from the castle to the pavilion, and defines a field between the two. Above is the slope up to the road, below is the spectator space.

The pavilion grows out of this site planning

Clever use of the site distantly echoes Schinkel's picturesque gardens and creates a dynamic contrast between the stone castle and the pavilion.

RICHARD DAVIES





## Key to plan

- 1 New retaining wall
- 2 Plant room
- 3 Store
- 4 Ladies' cloakroom
- 5 Gents cloakroom
- 6 Kitchen
- 7 Lightwell
- 8 Ladies' toilets
- 9 Gents' toilets
- 10 Entrance hall
- 11 Bar
- 12 Courtyard
- 13 Orangery
- 14 Marquee position
- 15 Terrace

Inside is a skilful blend of transparency and solid form, creating a space equally suited to an enclosed evening function (top), or opened up for watching regattas (bottom)

strategy. Where the castle and retaining wall, both in stone, seem earthbound, the pavilion soars. Its copper roof – recalling the shape of ships' hulls – takes the curves upwards, rising above a minimal steel frame which defines a covered spectator area.

Inside it's a remarkable space. The roof becomes an oculus, cleverly drawing attention to one of the many proudly displayed portraits of Yarborough facing the entrance. A polished Purbeck stone fireplace speaks of the baronial, but the glass walls and well-detailed steel – 'they wouldn't have been happy with anything that looked industrial,' says Croft – recall Mies. And the view is spectacular. It's a stretch of water where Henry VIII saw the Mary Rose sink; where now, beyond the boats, on the mainland, rise the flues of Fawley oil refinery. Croft's building, with subtlety rather than flamboyance, makes this view into a spectacle.

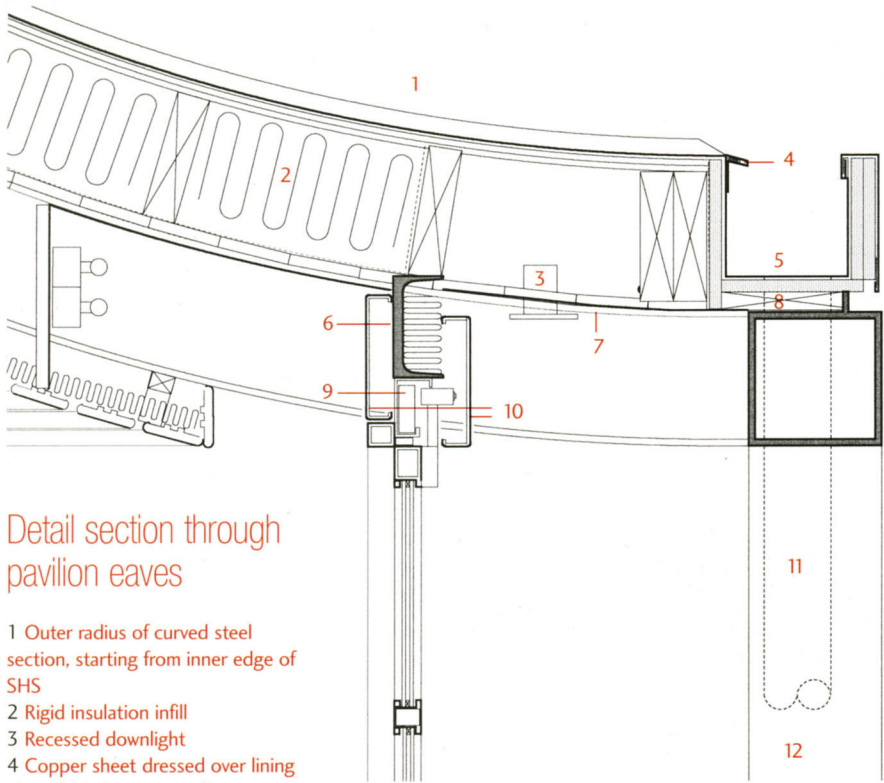
Within the glass envelope, a series of doors can be opened in numerous configurations to give an essentially outdoor or indoor space. No level change disrupts the flow. Behind, a courtyard with a sliding roof can double the size of the enclosed area for functions, or add to the already considerable variety of semi-outdoor spaces. A marquee can be added at the far end. The clever site planning also uses the slope helps to bury ancillary spaces – a kitchen which can cater for up

to 200 diners, and the cloakrooms. So from the sea it appears to be a simple pavilion, neatly composed but animated by the reefer jackets and white trousers of spectators on Regatta days.

In reality it's much more than that. It's a setting whose own particular rituals interweave with general social conventions to create momentary distortions of expectation. It was here that WH Smith – WS Gilbert's 'Ruler of the Queen's Navee' – took a tumble into the sea from his oh-so-pretentious yacht, just deserts for the penetration of this nouveau riche into one of society's inner sanctums. Here, more recently, Helmut Jahn crewed a winning yacht in the Admiral's Cup, mingling with compatriots Ted Turner and Larry Ellison, whose wealth dwarfs Smith's meagre 19th century millions. Here, too, Sir Edward Heath and Prince Philip enjoy a favourite hobby and Grace runs 'Thou who has given us salt-sea and fresh breeze/Bless these thy gifts that are before us'.

Croft's clever design does not sentimentalise such extraordinary occurrences, which would be an easy trap. Instead it draws on architectural traditions and makes them work for the traditions of the squadron – traditions which are, perhaps, the social equivalent of the Isle of Wight's geology – and giving the client, in John Power's words, 'exactly what we wanted'.





Detail section through pavilion eaves

- 1 Outer radius of curved steel section, starting from inner edge of SHS
- 2 Rigid insulation infill
- 3 Recessed downlight
- 4 Copper sheet dressed over lining plate, folded over top of gutter
- 5 175mm x 225mm square-profile copper gutter
- 6 Door track bolt fix to slotted RSA
- 7 Painted 20 x 110mm softwood timber boarding spans
- 8 Copper drain outlet
- 9 Sliding track channel suspended from structural steel
- 10 Removal metal panel over sliding track mechanism
- 11 Plastic rainwater pipe
- 12 200mm shs steel column



Cost specifications

Total project cost	£2.4 million
Total construction cost	£1,675,000
Cost per m <sup>2</sup>	£2,100
<b>Costs</b>	
Base building	£370,000
Glazed cladding	£405,000
Mechanical installations	£220,000
Electrical installations	£110,000
Lift	£30,000
Fit out	£130,000
Signage and fittings	£18,000
Sculpture courtyard	£77,000
Car parking and planting	£142,000
Preliminaries	£173,000

**Specifications**  
Sub-structure by GJ Banks (reader enquiry no 563), steel frame fabrication by Test Valley (enquiry no 564), steel windows and doors by Vista Brunswick (no 565). Moving tensile roof design by Architen (no 565). Copper roof and downpipes by Boss Metals (no 566). External and internal reconstituted stone paving by Minsterstone (no 567). Glass engraving by Marjella Taylor (no 568). External louvres by GDL. Specialist rooflights by Cantifix (no 569). D-line ironmongery and disabled WC fittings by Allgood

Credits

**Client**  
Royal Yacht Squadron  
**Architect**  
Thomas Croft Architect, London  
**Structural engineer**  
Dewhurst Macfarlane & Partners  
**Quantity surveyor**  
Davis Langdon & Everest  
**Lighting design**  
Isometrix  
**Mechanical design**  
ARB  
**Electrical design**  
Paktron  
**Acoustic consultant**  
Paul Gillieron Acoustic Design  
**Landscape design**  
Jonathan Bell  
**Main contractor**  
Mansell

(no 570). Sanitaryware and taps by Armitage Shanks (no 571). Granite vanitory tops by Touchstone (no 572). Sheet flooring by Altro (no 573). Metal ceilings by Luxalon (no 574). Catering equipment & cold room by Catercare (no 575).  
Purbeck stone walling and polished fire surround by D&P Lovell (no 576). Stone engraving by White Stonemasonry (no 577). Gas fire and slate hearth by Chesney's Antique Fireplace Warehouse (no 578). Copper clad fireplace flue by Selkirk (no 579).  
Intruder Alarm by Lifeline (no 580). Tubular steel radiators by Clyde Combustion (no 581). Emergency exit lighting by Erco (no 582). Bega external lighting from Concord Lighting (no 583). Coiled rope sofas and chairs by Interdesign (no 584). Stacking chairs by the Chair Company (no 585). Paint by Farrow & Ball (no 586). CCTV by Sensomatic (no 587). Ceramic tiles by H&R Johnson (no 588).