

Carisbrooke Castle in Moonfleet
A First Desktop Exploration
Royd Whitlock

1] INTRODUCTION

1.1] To make a short story long (Ed's injunction) it all started when I felt the need to re-read Lorna Doone. I think I had recently seen what I was sure was a thoroughly mucked up film adaptation. If remember aright I must originally have read a child's version in about 1956!

As I read an illustrated 1930 Boots edition (not an easy task I'm sure some of you will agree) I felt the need for aid by way of maps, word explanations and other helpful features. So I thought I'd try to do something about that to help me (and possibly, later, other readers). However, having finished reading the tome I realised it would be a very large, time-consuming task. And as time's a bit in short supply at present I wondered whether there was a shorter but equally 'suitable' story for the treatment.

And lo! was born the idea of the "Moonfleet Illustrated Companion Reader" Project, about January 2004. But if I imagined I'd be able to rapidly grow some literary magic beanstalk with nuggets of wisdom in its uppermost foliage I was mistaken. The task swells to fit the time available, as usual when you've no clear or rigid goal. So for 6 months or so I made notes, googled, phoned likely people, started various ideas off and stayed for 3 nights at the Moonfleet Manor Hotel. Subsequently I have been wallowing in a sea of (hopefully) creative flotsam.

Then I thought of finding a small enough topic that could be worked up and also be of interest to other 'idle and curious' readers. Having googled recently over Carisbrooke Castle an examination of the part its place in Moonfleet seemed justified.

1.2] This exercise would focus on a small portion of the total text and be concerned with a real place with relatively easily discoverable attributes. So not too much of that literary interpretation stuff ... or so I thought. And to aid my quest for a novel contribution I'd not encountered any discussion, let alone literary analysis, of such a 'micro-topic'.

1.3] The initial method was first to re-read and note carefully all and any text in Moonfleet relating to Carisbrooke Castle. Any text that could be regarded as factual description could be compared with relevant information from a range of sources. And then ... what? Not having done this ever before I would just have to boldly go Still as someone has written similarly elsewhere: as in life so in micro-text analysis, skill will make something of the worst of choices.

2] TEXT EXAMINATION

2.1] There are four chapters that contain reference to Carisbrooke Castle - XII, XIV, XV and XVI. In Chapter XII, *A Funeral*, John relates his solving of Blackbeard's cryptic clues as to the whereabouts of the treasure. He goes on to tell Elzevir what Mr Glennie told him about Blackbeard's treasure [Chapter II, *The Floods*].

Elzevir listens carefully, if eagerly, and announces his conclusion:

"John, the diamond is yet at Carisbrooke. I wonder I had not thought of Carisbrooke before you spoke; and there he can get fourscore feet, and twice and thrice fourscore if he list, and none to stop him{1}. 'Tis Carisbrooke. I have heard of that well from childhood, and once saw it as a boy{2}. It is dug in the Castle Keep, and goes down 50' fathoms or more into the bowels of the chalk below{3}. It is so deep no man can draw the buckets on a winch, but they have an ass inside a tread-wheel to hoist them up{4}."

"..... 'Tis a known place, and I have heard that people come as far as from London to see the castle and this well."{5}

There are several points that could be explored here.

{1} There have been only two wells at Carisbrooke, as far as is known (1). The earlier one was probably constructed between 1100AD and 1107AD in the Keep as a seep well. It is about 160 feet (49m) deep. {2}

If as a lad Elzevir had 'actually' visited the castle it is puzzling that as an adult he appears to have confused the two wells. Certainly, say, by 1700 AD the only well-house (rebuilt 1587 AD) with a tread wheel was the one in the courtyard. Interestingly, in the 1999 BBC audio tape dramatisation Elzevir makes no mention of the specific location when he realises the well is at Carisbrooke Castle (2).

{3} The Keep well is masonry-lined for its whole depth, according to the Museum Curator, Rosemary Cooper, both for the first 70 feet as it passes through the made-up (chalk) material of the Keep and lower 90 feet in the chalk. JMF's 300 feet plus is 'allowable' literary licence!

{4} There are traces in the adjoining Keep wall of a support for a timber windlass. But there is no evidence for a tread wheel during the well's probably short life, because in 1136 AD it dried up during a threatened siege.

Subsequently, and no later than 1260 AD, a new well of comparable depth (49m, 161 feet) was dug in the courtyard. Again, as far as we know, this is the well that from an early point in its existence had a well-house and a tread wheel, probably operated by prisoners originally. The tread wheel was refurbished when the well-house was rebuilt in 1597 AD. It is still in use, with necessary repairs (3).

{5} The renowned traveller Celia Fiennes visited in the mid 1690s AD. She records:

"From Yarmouth to Newport a little town that the arm of the Sea comes up to, its one of the biggest town in the Island; in a mile off it is Casbrooke [Carisbrooke] castle into which King Charles the first retired when he was worsted by the Parliaments forces; there are some good roomes still that remaine but the most part are destroyed and only ruined walls to be seen, there is a deep well of 40 fathom, they draw up the bucket by a great Wheele in which they put a horse or ass, a stone thrown down sounds a long tyme ere you hear it splash into the water;" (4)

Did JMF weave some of this into Elzevir's account - Celia Fiennes' journey to the Isle of Wight was made from her London abode?

2.2] Later, in Chapter XIV, The Well-House, whilst John and Elzevir lodge at the Bugle [I] (in Newport) and Elzevir gathers intelligence and plans their mission, no explicit mention is made of the precise whereabouts of the well in the castle. We are left to infer that the well is perhaps in a locked or secure building because Elzevir has to concede that he has had to take the "man who keeps the well" into his confidence.

On the appointed morning we are brought to the entrance to Carisbrooke Castle.

“Here are two flanking towers and a stout gate-house reached by a stone bridge crossing the moat; ...”{1}

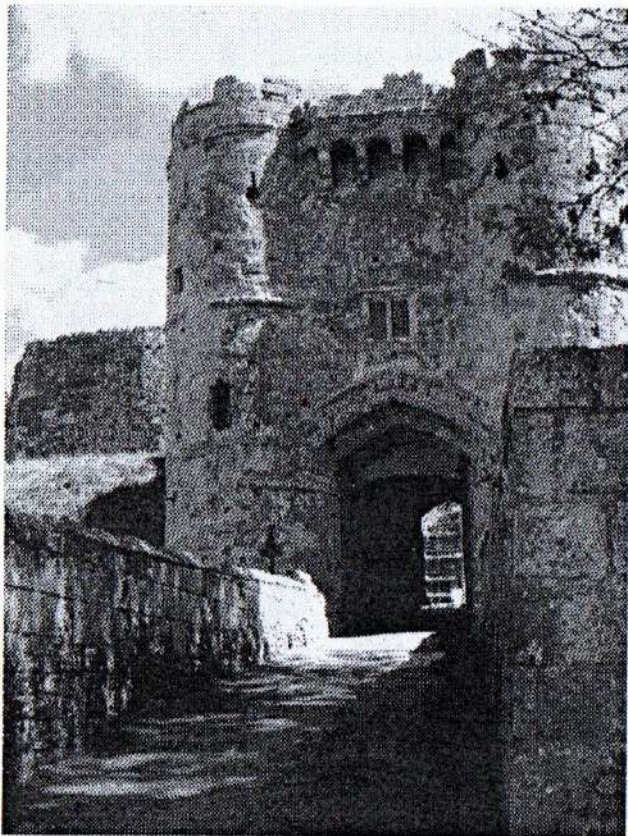
“... a wicket in the heavy door was opened ...”{2}

“... so the man led on and we followed him. We crossed a bailey or outer court where the rain had made the gravel very miry{3}, and came on the other side to a door which led by some steps into a large hall{4}, I think, for there was an inscription over it very plain in lead;

“He led me into his banquet hall, and his banner over me was love.”{5}

“... the whole place gutted and turned into a barrack for French prisoners.”{6}

“We left it [the hall] at the other end, went down three steps into the open air again, crossed another small court, ...”{7}



{1} This accords well with the present state of the castle and what is known about the history of its construction and repair, as the illustration shows.

{2} The gatehouse now has two sets of double gates, one at each end of the gatehouse. The inner one is medieval, but the outer one is late 19th century. According to the current curator of the Museum, Ms Rosemary Cooper, there is a wicket or small gate in one larger gate of each of the

(www.iwcam.co.uk with permission) two pairs of gates. From the description there appears to be only one pair of gates, presumably the inner ones. Again the text is clearly ‘accurate’.

{3} One would suspect that if this were a real feature of the castle courtyard in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it would reflect inadequate subsurface drainage. Modern drainage was installed in the 20th century.

{4} There was a Great Hall within the castle; it now houses the Castle Museum . There are several large buildings (or their remains) not far from the gatehouse upon which JMF may have based his 'banquet hall'.

However, Rosemary Cooper comments:

"It would be possible to get to the well-house by going through the castle's medieval great hall (now the museum). Getting into the great hall doesn't involve steps (and I don't think there's evidence that it ever did). However, the great hall may well be the building JMF had in mind as the banqueting hall. I believe it was where the French prisoners of war were housed. To get from the great hall to the well-house, you would have to go up a flight of stairs (in the same building), along a passageway, across a landing, through a door in the opposite end of the building (to get outside), and descend a flight of about half a dozen steps. This would bring you back to the courtyard a few yards from the well-house."

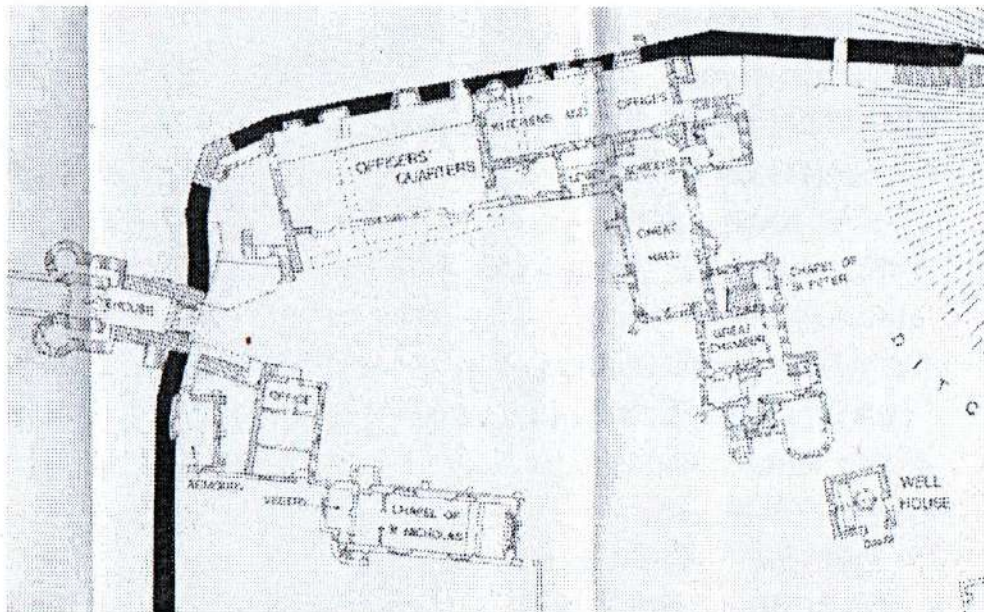
From the plan [(5) and below] of the castle it doesn't appear possible or necessary to follow the layout of buildings as described in the story. At present, once you pass through the gatehouse you can see the well-house and proceed directly across the courtyard to it somewhat to the right . From the known sequence of building at the castle it would appear this was always so. Though maps show the dates of construction of the various edifices they unfortunately omit walls which probably existed enclosing the courtyard and restricting access to the Well-house.

One can also speculate that the more circuitous route was created to add to dramatic effect: the act of locking and unlocking doors is both a real and a symbolic tension raiser: even more so on their flight. The BBC audio tape adaptation has John Elzevir going straight to the well-house across the courtyard from the gatehouse - most likely due to the constraints of available recording time.

{5} Having introduced the route through the 'banquet hall' why choose a verse from the Song of Solomon (2:4) for the mural inscription? Was this another of JMF's little literary jokes [qv 'JMF Literary Jokes'] by contrasting the "gutted" and "evil-smelling" state of the hall with that joyous and plenteous one implied by the quotation directly and the content of the rest of the associated text of the Song of Solomon? And no doubt the French prisoners hardly took comfort in their current condition from "his banner over me was love".

Whatever else it clearly demonstrated his deep knowledge of scriptural texts. Others are more qualified to comment further on JMF's possible motivation(s).

Another point of interest is the use of lead for the inscription, rather than, say, plain engraved stone. So far after quite extensive inquiry I have been able to locate only one example of an inscription in lead attached to the outside wall of a building. There is such a plaque on a wall of what was built as an almshouse in 1889 in Bromsgrove. But it is very likely the lead inscription was affixed somewhat later and so might post-date the writing and publication of Moonfleet. Whether JMF would have been aware of this is unknown. There are more examples of lead wire being hammered into engraved lettering, particularly in gravestones and memorials. [This is an area which will be investigated further.] Can readers provide possible examples - were such inscriptions common in former times?



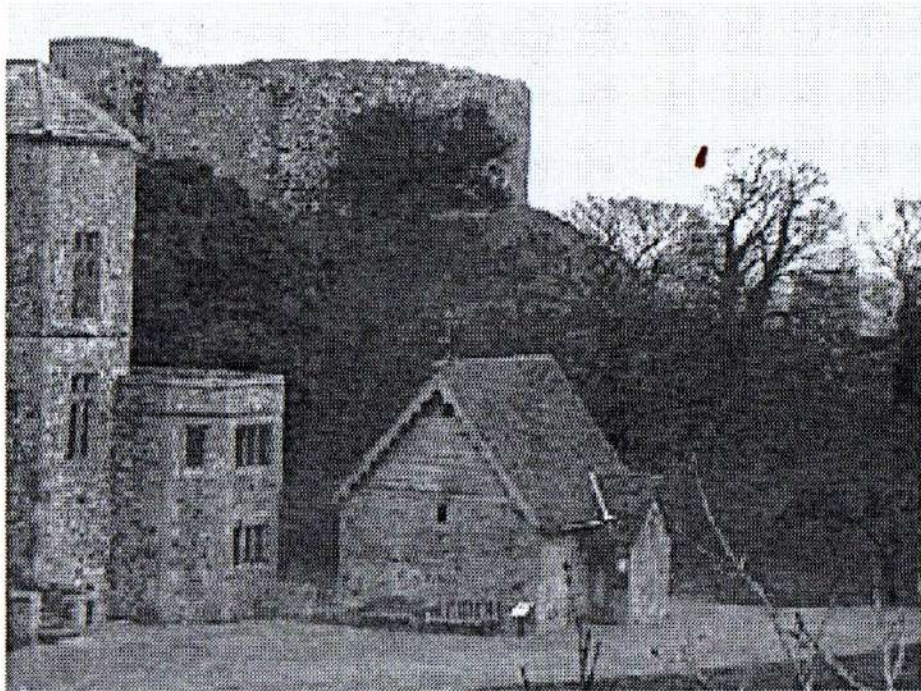
(Reproduced with permission of English Heritage)

{6} In 1758, the year in which this episode is set, England and France were indeed at war on a global scale - in Europe (The Seven Years War, 1756-73) in India, Canada and on the High Seas, to name but a few fields of conflict (6). {7}

There are steps leading up to various large buildings but today none comprise just ?three treads? If this number is invention was there a reason for the number 3? As an aside, there is no mention of the 70 or so steps that would have to have been climbed were the well that in the Keep, as Elzevir originally suggests (Ch.XII).

2.3] The next part of the chapter gives us a description of the exterior of the well-house:

“... a square building of stone with a high roof {1} like the large dove-cots {2} that you may see in old stackyards {3}” Comparing this with the picture below shows this to be an accurate description.



(With permission from <http://www.schools.bedfordshire.gov.uk/GI/history/Carisbrooke/The%20wellhouse.htm>)

{1} The well-house is about 22' square (nearly 7m) and about 22' tall. {2}

The form of dovecots [dovecotes] varied considerably from county to county. Perhaps those of south Dorset/southern England followed this general pattern (7).

{3} Stackyards, I discovered, were enclosed areas where hay, straw, etc. were stacked and stored for use by cattle especially during the winter months, often close to the main farm building. (Thomas Hardy sets a fire in a stackyard that results in Gabriel Oak finding work on Bathsheba's farm in *Far from the Madding Crowd*.)

2.4] Falkner now takes us into the well-house in the rest of Chapter XIV.

“The building was open to the roof, {1} and the first thing to be seen in it was that tread-wheel of which Elzevir had spoken. It was a great open wheel of wood, ten or twelve feet across, and very like a

mill-wheel, only the space between the rims was boarded flat, but had tread nailed on it to give foothold to a donkey. {2}”



(With permission from <http://www.isleofwight.inuk.com/index.htm>)

“At the side of the wheel was the well-mouth, a dark, round opening with a low parapet round it, rising two feet from the floor. {3}”

“A spindle ran from the axle of the wheel across the well and on the spindle was a drum to take the rope. There was some clutch or fastening which could be fixed or loosed at will to make the drum turn with the tread-wheel, or let it run free, and a footbreak to lower the bucket fast or slow, or stop it altogether. {4}”

{1} - {4} We would perhaps not expect J.T., a 15 - 16 year old boy with limited education, to provide a technically detailed description so these descriptions look pretty accurate, as far as can be ascertained from photographs such as the two above. A question that comes to mind is whether JMF visited the castle or got his information from friends or guidebooks or other source.

“As soon as we were entered the turnkey locked the door from the inside ... {5}”

{5} For a castle being used as a gaol this is not surprising. Further research would be required to confirm this.? Apart from the menacing presence of the turnkey JT had another source of anxiety:

“Art sure the well is clean, and that no deadly gases lurk below?” asks John of Elzevir. As answer the turnkey lowered a candle stuck to a small piece of wood on a string into the well. Interestingly, an engraving published in 1865 shows such a device (8)

“...because the parapet was low, and the floor round it green and slippery with water-splashing ... {6}”

{6} This is another observation that is entirely plausible, but because of the current lack of daily use it would not now be expected to be the case..

The description of what happened when the gaoler dropped a stone into the well is elaborated into a veritable onomatopoeic opera:

“crashing and whirring till it met the water with a booming plunge; and there rose a groan and a moan from the eddies, like those dreadful sounds of the surge that I heard on lonely nights in the sea-caverns underneath our hiding-place in Purbeck. ”

Only personal experience perhaps would give a view on whether JMF exceeded the terms of his poetic licence!

(JMF returns to the phantasmal sound effects whilst JT is in the well in Chapter XV:

*“And all the while there rose groanings and moanings from eddies in the bottom of the well, as if the spirits that kept watch over the jewel were yammering together ... ”)**

2.5] The stage is now set for the dramatic highlight - JT's descent into the well. From the atmosphere created it is no wonder that JT is fearful. I expect most of us would be in a similar situation.

Chapter XV's head quotation “ The grave doth gape and doting death is near” is ominously chilling!

“The bucket was large, ... and I could crouch in it enough to feel safe of not falling out.”

Looking at the photograph (1970~) above the bucket in use in more recent times doesn't look large enough, but perhaps in earlier times animal (and prisoner) welfare was less important and buckets were larger. Or, this is an example of an author 'shaping a reality'.

As JT descends we are given a description of the well interior.

“ ... and the air to grow chilly ... “

Is there a body of knowledge of temperature change as one descends wells ? Normally a temperature rise is noted as one enters the bowels of the earth. Are we to conjecture that the cooling is at least partly due to the current of water at the bottom of the well (*) - enhanced by JT's fearfulness?

" ...and that for the most part it [the well wall] was cut through solid chalk; but here and there, where the chalk had failed or was broken away, they had lined the walls with brick, patching, them now on this side, now on that, and now all round. ... the walls here were lined completely with small flat bricks ... "

Again, without an inspection of the state of the well walls we can only speculate on the actual condition of the walls and any repairs that might have been done over the centuries or even during the well's construction. We are no doubt familiar with the idea of crumbling chalk cliffs and quarry faces, but a well is not subject to the usual aerial erosion. Whatever the case JMF sets up the scene to provide a credible hiding place for treasure and its discovery after a certain amount of difficulty!

Brick sizes in England have shown variation; like spelling there was little attempt at standardisation until relatively recently (17th century). Assuming the repairs to the well walls were carried out at sometime between the Elizabethan refurbishment and 1758 the bricks would indeed be less thick than either Georgian or Victorian (or even modern ones) (9). This detail is perhaps not unsurprising considering JMF's architectural interest.

When JT fails to find any sign of the hiding place at the supposed depth of 80 feet JMF introduces the notion of the floor having been raised (by an unspecified amount) .

"They say this floor has been raised; you must try lower."

If this had actually happened then unless the whole surrounding courtyard had also been raised (by about 6 feet) there would be several steps up into the well-house or just inside the building. Earlier no mention is made of steps as Elzevir and JT enter the well-house. (This is of course without mentioning the need to have raised the tread-wheel mechanism and the well-house walls and roof!) The curator reports that there now are no steps! So is this another example of an author moulding *la réalité* for dramatic purpose?

On being lowered deeper JT finds that:

"The sides of this well are not moist, green, or clammy, like the sides of some others where damp and noxious exhalations abound, but dry and clean; for it is said that there are below hidden entrances and exits for the water, which also keep it moving. So these bricks were also dry and clean, ..."

As far as is known there are no passages, secret or otherwise, leading off from the bottom of the well so this is another reference to caves, mysterious tunnels and enclosed spaces that JMF invokes a number of times. Though, again, Rosemary Cooper comments that there was a tradition that the water flows through the bottom of the well. This was supported by the near perfect reliability of the well.

2.6] In chapter XVI, after JT retrieves the jewel from the well, there is the fight between Elzevir and the turnkey, resulting in the latter's death by falling down the well and drowning. JT and Elzevir then leave, following a reverse sequence of unlocking and locking doors before they are free again.

3] CLOSING REMARKS

3.1.1 So what has been gained by this exercise, the reader might well ask? As the Introduction stated (#1.3) the task was undertaken on a prospecting basis: follow the vein and see what value is unearthed.

3.1.2

One aspect is that of the sources of inspiration JMF might have had for writing Moonfleet.

By all accounts he had an adventurous and interesting childhood, exploring caves, cliffs and countryside and heard stories of smuggling.

Later his education, formal and informal, would have opened up vistas of 'new' knowledge. Amongst other things, he developed a deep interest in architecture, especially ecclesiastical.

Whether he was prompted to scribe by RLS's 'Treasure Island' which appeared in 1893, is a matter for speculation. JMF would, however, have been VERY aware of T. Hardy's literary creation of 'Wessex' with its roots in the real land and its people

It might be interesting to know what external sources of information JMF used in preparing and writing the chapters relating to Carisbrooke Castle and whether he actually visited the Isle of Wight.

Inevitably, the skill or otherwise with which an author takes the weft of knowledge/experience and weaves it with the warp of imagination to create the fabric of a possible reality is bound to impinge upon a reader's consciousness. The textual clarity, simplicity and directness which enable the reader to convincingly live in this fiction thus partly depends upon the accuracy and coherency of the use of elements of our shared realities.

3.2.2

JMF could have easily have decided to invent a completely fictional world. But, perhaps, by using memories and knowledge of real places it ensures some internally consistent and self-referential mode of construction that is more believable? Also, given the glimpses into his personality provided, e.g., by K. Warren, it might be thought that JMF was well aware that his work would be examined mercilessly for inaccuracies and anachronisms - he did have the example of the critics' treatment of Hardy before him!

JMF was not writing a fantasy but an adventure story, the subject of which was not very far from perhaps having been a common experience when the book was published. He does, however, nuance for a desired dramatic effect.

3.3.1

On one level this exercise can be looked at as a species of [virtual] reverse text engineering. As such it has a number of shortcomings: one 'is that it not based on primary sources of information, but for personal reasons, has to rely on secondary or even tertiary sources.

Another problem is that of the passage of time: in its millennium of history Carisbrooke Castle has seen all manner of change through demolition, rebuilding, alteration and extension. Thus in 1897, just a year before the publication of Moonfleet, the inner gates were renovated and new outer gates were fitted for the first time. Any conclusions drawn therefore require even more circumspection.

3.3.2

We are, however, left with of number of questions and puzzles; perhaps readers can offer answers or points of clarification?

4] REFERENCES

- 1 *Carisbrooke Castle*, Rosemary Cooper, (English Heritage, 2002), page 6
- 2 *Moonfleet*, (BBC Radio Collection, 1999)
- 3 *Carisbrooke Castle*, Rosemary Cooper, (English Heritage, 2002), pages 8 & 20
- 4 *The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, ed. C. Morris, (Webb & Bower, 1982), page 71
- 5 *Carisbrooke Castle*, C. Young, (English Heritage, 2003) pages 32-33
- 6 <http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/pages/seven.html>
- 7 *Dovecotes*, P & J Hansell (Shire Books, 2001), page 15 et seq
- 8 *Carisbrooke Castle*, Rosemary Cooper (English Heritage, 2002), page 25
- 9 <http://freespace.virgin.net/roger.hewitt/iwias/bricks.htm>

5] BIBLIOGRAPHY

- John Meade Falkner*, K Warren (Edwin Mellen Press, 1994)
Carisbrooke Castle, J. Shuter (Heinemann Library, 1999)
Carisbrooke Castle, R. Chamberlain (English Heritage, 1996)

6] NOTES

I. Rosemary Cooper, Museum Curator provides this note: The Bugle Inn was in existence until fairly recently. But now it is known as Bugle House - serving other purposes. The Wheatsheaf, mentioned as an alternative accommodation, is still a local hostelry in Newport. Incidentally, 'bugle' is a local word for a young bull.

II There has been a Bugle Inn at Brading for many years. It was a coaching inn at one time. It is very close to the railway station. There is also a Bugle Inn at Yarmouth and possibly in other IoW towns.

III JMF = John Meade Falkner; JT = John Trenchard