

— ISLE OF WIGHT —  
**HIDDEN  
HEROES**

**Primary School Education Resource**

**Isabella de Fortibus (1237-1293) - Last owner of the Isle of Wight**



## Who was Isabella?

Isabella de Fortibus was the last ever independent Lord of the Isle of Wight, known as 'The Lady of the Isle', after inheriting it when she was in her mid twenties, and becoming the richest non-royal heiress in England.

## What did Isabella do?

Not many people can claim to have owned an island and lived in a castle. But in the 13th Century a feisty, young, single noblewoman suddenly found herself with wealth and power thrust upon her after she inherited the Isle of Wight and moved into her new home at Carisbrooke Castle. Her name was Isabella de Fortibus and she was known as the 'Lady of the Isle'.

Isabella de Fortibus had always loved the Isle of Wight, visiting many times when she was a child, but she didn't become Lord of the Isle of Wight, her official title, until after the death of her brother, Baldwin de Redvers, the 7th Earl of Devon, who owned lands in Devon and Hampshire, including the Isle of Wight. You could say it was recompense for losing her wealthy husband, William de Fortibus, only two years before, which left her a widow of six children.

So there she was, a woman of only 26, who suddenly found herself the richest independent lady in England, one of the wealthiest widows who ever lived, and owner of a sunny diamond in the Solent. And she was very rich. In fact, in 1260s her net wealth jumped from £1,500 to £2,500. To understand what those figures mean today, one just has to add another three noughts - some serious cash!

Isabella was the Business Dragon of her day, a strong-minded leader who, together with her team of influential legal and financial advisers, managed the towns, forests and manor houses on the Island, including land and houses from Southampton to Northern England. Money was collected from her portfolio of estates from all over the country and transported, often as gold coins under armed guard, back to Carisbrooke to then be distributed.

Although she was a religious woman, having her own chapel, she had several arguments with the monks at Quarr Abbey. One incident involved her demanding a road to be built from Carisbrooke Priory into Parkhurst forest, as the crow flies, just so she could more easily have wood delivered to provide building materials for her numerous Carisbrooke Castle makeovers, which included a new kitchen and a great chamber with a window framing the wonderful Island views.

She is responsible for many alterations and additions to the castle over her reign, many of which remain today such as her window seat, made for her countess's chamber.

Though she was a powerful widow she was a vulnerable heiress at a time when there were many tales of widows being kidnapped and forced into marriages with unscrupulous men who only wanted their wealth and land.

Isabella must have been aware of this and, although she was courted and promised to various powerful men over the years, she refused to marry any of them, even hiding from one of the men, Simon de Montford, in Hampshire, and then in Wales!

The Isle of Wight was a strategically important place at the time, when any invader, such as France, might have easily landed before mounting a full-scale invasion of England. Isabella knew what power she had and was determined to keep the Island independent from royal interference.

This greatly irked the king of the time, Henry III. His son, Edward I was promised to marry Isabella, but she refused his advances, never wanting to relinquish control of her beloved Island. Edward went on to marry her daughter, Aveline, aged only 10, a custom that was normal at the time. However, like all of Isabella's other five children, Aveline died before she reached adulthood, leaving Isabella without an heir to her fortune.

When Edward I later became king he spent his reign acquiring lands and wealth, but his eye was always on taking control of the Island from Isabella. The Isle of Wight was a strategic position in England due to the risk of invasion from the French and the lands produced much wealth.

Though Isabella commanded an army to defend the Island, Edward still persisted in demanding she sell it to him, but she fought to keep control, even when Edward challenged her in court.

In 1293, fate caught up with Isabella, because while she was on a pilgrimage from Canterbury to London, she fell gravely ill and took refuge in one of her many London manor houses. When Edward I heard word of her imminent death he sent his minions to her bed chamber, with a charter for her to sign that granted him her lands, wealth and the Isle of Wight. But she was too ill to properly sign it, and could only mark a cross on the contract. With all her children deceased, and only a very distant cousin, she had no direct family to leave her wealth and Island too.

Sadly, Isabella, Lady of the Isle, had no choice but to sell the Island to Edward I for a sum worth £4,000, a paltry amount at the time.

Isabella's reign was over and her beloved Island was back in royal control. But she will always be remembered as an amazing example of a powerful and passionate woman who truly loved the Isle of Wight and held onto it until the very end.

Today, Isabella's independent spirit lives on.

### **Why is Isabella a Hidden Hero?**

- Isabella was a powerful woman who was the last independent person to hold the title of 'Lord of the Isle of Wight' and who held onto a strategically important place at a time when England was worried about French invasion.
- Isabella represents the fierce independent Island spirit, doing things her own way, which still holds true today.

### **Isabella Facts**

- Isabella de Fortibus was the last independent single female lord (lady) of the Isle of Wight before it was owned by royals.

- She was courted by many powerful men including Edward I but refused all marriage proposals and even hid from a few!
- She loved the Isle of Wight and only sold it at the end, ruling for 33 years before having no choice but to sell it to King Edward I on her deathbed.
- She lived in Carisbrooke Castle for 33 years until her death. She is buried in Westminster Abbey.
- She sold many of her properties and lands but never wanted to give up the Isle of Wight, but on her deathbed sold it to Edward I for 6000 Marks.
- She was a clever business woman and owned many properties and manor houses all across England, including three shops in Newport, Isle of Wight, where Boots is currently situated.
- She was forever annoying the local monks at Quarr Abbey and the King of England at the time, Henry III, as she wanted to keep the Island fiercely independent and out of royal hands.
- Queen Bower is named after Isabella de Fortibus, as at the time she was thought of as a queen, wearing the finest clothes and enjoying walks in Borthwood Copse.
- She was the last Lord of the Isle of Wight during the reign of Henry III, then Edward I and at a time when there were fears the French would invade. The Island was thought of as a very strategic place to defend as invaders wanted to use it as a landing site before a full invasion.

## Isabella Timeline

**1100s** - After the Norman conquest the de Redvers family was given the Island, and they lived in Carisbrooke Castle, then after came Isabella's father, Baldwin, Earl of Devon.

**1237** - Isabella was born, a noblewoman, the elder daughter of Baldwin de Redvers, 6th Earl of Devon.

**1248** - Isabella marries William de Fortibus, Earl of Aumale at only age 11.

**1260** - Isabella's husband dies, leaving her a widow at only 23.

**1262** - Isabella inherits the Isle of Wight when her brother, also named Baldwin de Redvers, 7th Earl of Devon, dies.

**1264** - Simon de Montford acquired the rights, from the king, to marry Isabella - she refuses and hides from him!

**1274** - Aveline, Isabella's only daughter, and last of her children, died.

**1281** - Isabella stand's up in court to Edward I's challenge to take control of the Isle of Wight.

**1293** - Isabella signs over the Isle of Wight to King Edward I on her deathbed at her manor house in Stockwell, London. The price: £4000. The Island is now controlled by royals.

## **Educational Resources**

### **School Trips**

#### **Visit Carisbrooke Castle Museum**

Visit Carisbrooke Castle Museum and discover more about Isabella and her life at the castle.

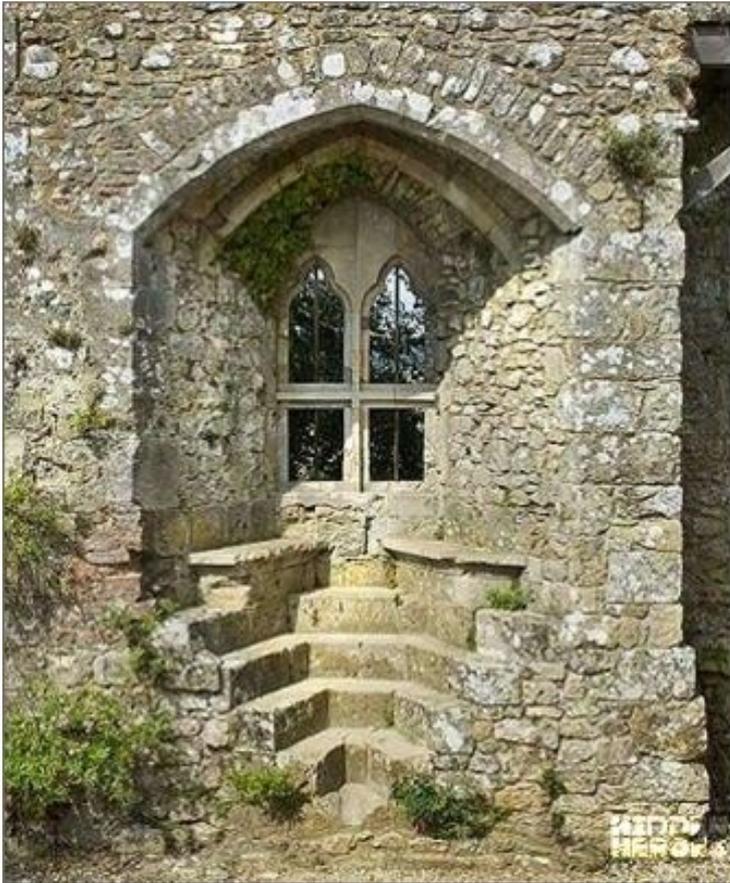
Carisbrooke Castle Museum  
Castle Hill  
Newport  
Isle of Wight  
PO30 1XY

01983 523112

[www.carisbrookecastlemuseum.org.uk](http://www.carisbrookecastlemuseum.org.uk)

#### **Sit at Isabella's Window**

Isabella's window seat still remains in the ruins of Carisbrooke Castle, and is the place she used to have her Countesses Room (sitting room).



Window of Countess Isabella's great chamber at Carisbrooke Castle © Carisbrooke Castle Museum

## Ideas for Incorporating Isabella into the Classroom

Isabella and other Hidden Heroes can link into many areas of the [National Curriculum](#) including history and art and design.

Below is a breakdown of subject areas and content quoted from the National Curriculum where it might be appropriate for Isabella, plus some ideas for study:

### History

Isabella was significantly powerful and wealthy independent woman at an interesting time in history. There are many hooks for study about her life.

Link to [National Curriculum for history](#).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-history-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-history-programmes-of-study>

Ideas:

- Study how the the Island was strategically important at the time due to fear of invasion from France.
- It was William the Conqueror who first created the title 'Lord of the Isle of Wight' in 1066, and Isabella was the last non-royal 'lord' to rule. Isabella rules as feudal lord earning money from payments from her various manor houses on Isle of Wight and all the way up England. Study the manor system, local manor houses, etc.
- Research Isabella's life at the castle, how she changed the look of Carisbrooke Castle Museum and the wider castle over the period of her life.

## English

Link to [National Curriculum for English](#).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study>

## Ideas:

- Describe how Isabella might have looked, what kind of person was she? How did she talk? Was she fierce or loving? Be descriptive.
- Write a non-fictional, newspaper-style report about Isabella having to run away and hide from a rich royal prince, like Edward I, or some rich baron keen to marry Isabella and gain all her wealth and power of the Island. Remember answer these six things: **Who** was involved? **What** happened? **Where** did it take place? **When** did it take place? **Why** did it happen? **How** did that happen?

## Art

There's not much to go apart from the sculpture of her face on what Isabella looked like so it's all open to interpretation. Plenty of scope for art projects.



Transparency showing the head of Isabella de Fortibus (perhaps from Christchurch Priory).

Link to [National Curriculum for Art and Design](#)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-art-and-design-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-art-and-design-programmes-of-study>

#### Ideas:

- We only have the sculpture of her face above to go on what she really looked like. She was very wealthy and was supposed to have worn the finest clothes made from fabrics imported from all over the world. Create some fashion magazine style or catwalk images or art interpreting all her range of outfits. Do some historical research for accuracy.
- Visit her window seat at Carisbrooke Castle and then in the classroom make a shoebox version of her living room, complete with window. Decorate the castle how it might have looked. Do some research for accuracy.

#### Website Links

Carisbrooke Castle Museum:

<http://carisbrookecastlemuseum.org.uk>

English Heritage link:

<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/women-in-history/womens/isabella-de-fortibus/>

Wikipedia:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isabel\\_de\\_Forz\\_suo\\_jure\\_8th\\_Countess\\_of\\_Devon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isabel_de_Forz_suo_jure_8th_Countess_of_Devon)

Local IW history links:

<http://woottonbridgeiow.org.uk/deredvers.php>

## **Books/Research**

Books that reference Isabella or have more information about the time she ruled:

- Quarr Abbey and its Lands 1132-1631 by S F Hockey
- Insula Vecta - The Isle of Wight in the Middle Ages by S F Hockey
- A Baronial Household of the Thirteenth Century by Margaret Wade Labarge
- The Isle of Wight - An Illustrated History by Jack and Johanna Jones