

CHAMPION TREE KEY



The Giant Weeping Fig

Ficus carica "Brown Turkey"

This elegant and highly edible fig is one of the oldest of its kind in Britain. It was planted early in the life of the Royal National Hospital, built on this site in the Victorian era. Originally it would have been planted against the huge rock-face behind to bask in the sunshine, but has now grown vastly, its branches arching over and rooting where they touch the floor. We harvest huge fresh figs from it in summer.



The White Mountain Banksia

Banksia integrifolia ssp. *monticola*

Only collected as seed from the wild by an expedition to Tasmania by staff from the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew in 2000 and planted here in 2005, yet at ten years old is the largest in the UK. This small tree has sweet scented lemony yellow cone shaped flowers held high on its branches. The underside of the leaves is a silvery white. Banksia do not usually like Ventnor because the soil is alkaline, but this specimen is clearly very happy here.



The Chilean Acorn

Cryptocarya alba

Two venerable and champion specimens from the time of Sir Harold Hillier, these rarely seen trees from Chile have an ancient lineage through prehistory to times when the world climate was much warmer. Living material from these specimens has been studied by scientists aiming to seek correlation between how these plants grow now, compared to the recent and ancient past. This could give evidence of the speed of climate change on our planet.



The Chinese Windmill Palms

Trachycarpus fortunei

Certainly the oldest, though not the tallest, of the palms alive in the UK. The seed from which these palms grew was collected in China by Robert Fortune in the 19th century and sent back to Europe. The first plants that grew soon died in heated stove houses, but specimens presented to Albert, Prince Consort to Queen Victoria, survived. A single, now dead, specimen was kept at Osborne House, the remainder were planted here by royal appointment and are still here over 150 years later.



The Japanese Elm

Zelkova serrata

With a low and spreading habit it is surprising it can hold up its branches, but in its native Japan this tree can live for a thousand years. As it has grown with us since 1972 other nearby trees have had to be removed to make way, soon its branch tips will reach the path. At this point growth will slow and the head of the tree will thicken and produce thousands of winged seeds.



The Black Peppermint Tree

Eucalyptus amygdalina

The tallest of its kind, and with the widest girth, this is a mighty Gum Tree even by standards of the wild. It sheds its bark annually, you can see shreds hanging down. In the spring time it also sheds its scimitar leaves, they turn red and carpet the grass beneath like a red mirror. Shortly afterwards vanilla scented flowers emerge whose perfume drifts through the garden as far as the Australian Garden where it would feel quite at home.



The Alpine Cider Gum

Eucalyptus archeri

Another giant from the mountains of south eastern Australia with elegant peeling bark that reveals a mosaic of blue and grey underneath. This tree is also much larger than it would grow in the wild, and is only 43 years old with perhaps twice as many years still ahead of it. The flowers are beloved of bees.



The Madrone

Arbutus xalapensis

It is claimed that Sir Harold Hillier collected seed of this tree whilst on his honeymoon in Mexico. In bringing back this plant he introduced a tree with one of the most smoothest and most irresistibly tactile trunks on Earth. Feel its smooth bark. In spring this turns cinnamon brown and peels off in flakes like antique paint, showing lime green below. Through the year the colour will change through flesh pink and red with a waxy white bloom.



The Evergreen Magnolia

Magnolia grandiflora "Charles Dickens"

Originally from North America, the evergreen Magnolias were grown in warmer parts of Europe, often flanking grand buildings. This tree is a smaller cultivar named in honour of a visitor to the Isle of Wight, the author Charles Dickens. Visitors often remark on the red buds clearly seen on the ends of branches – there are actually fruit resulting from the flowers produced the previous summer.



The Hybrid Pear

Pyrus x michauxii

This is a naturally occurring cross between two wild pear trees found in the Middle East. It demonstrates the passion Sir Harold Hillier had for rare plants by its inclusion in his early plantings. It is now the tallest of its kind, and produces a small, incredibly hard and virtually inedible fruit. You may see some gathered beneath, or rolled to the bottom of the bank.

VENTNOR BOTANIC GARDEN



When Sir Harold Hillier began planting what was Steephill Pleasure Gardens in the early 1970s, later to become Ventnor Botanic Garden, the introductions were those trees and shrubs too tender for mainland gardens. The pattern of the early planting (reputed to be Sir Harold riding a farm trailer and dispensing trees and shrubs off the back, to be planted where they landed) was into 22 acres of neglected land congested by overgrown evergreen oaks, sycamore and Monterey pine. We can be thankful to the freeze of 1986 and storms of '87 and '89 for allowing breathing room in the garden for Hillier's trees to mature, and allow new waves of planting into a more thoughtful landscape.

The benign microclimate of the Undercliff has allowed these trees and shrubs to flourish to the point where now, in such a short period of time they are Champion Trees – the largest of their kind in the UK. This trail will show you where these are, along with some of the more notable specimens in the garden today.

Undercliff Drive, Ventnor, Isle of Wight PO38 1UL

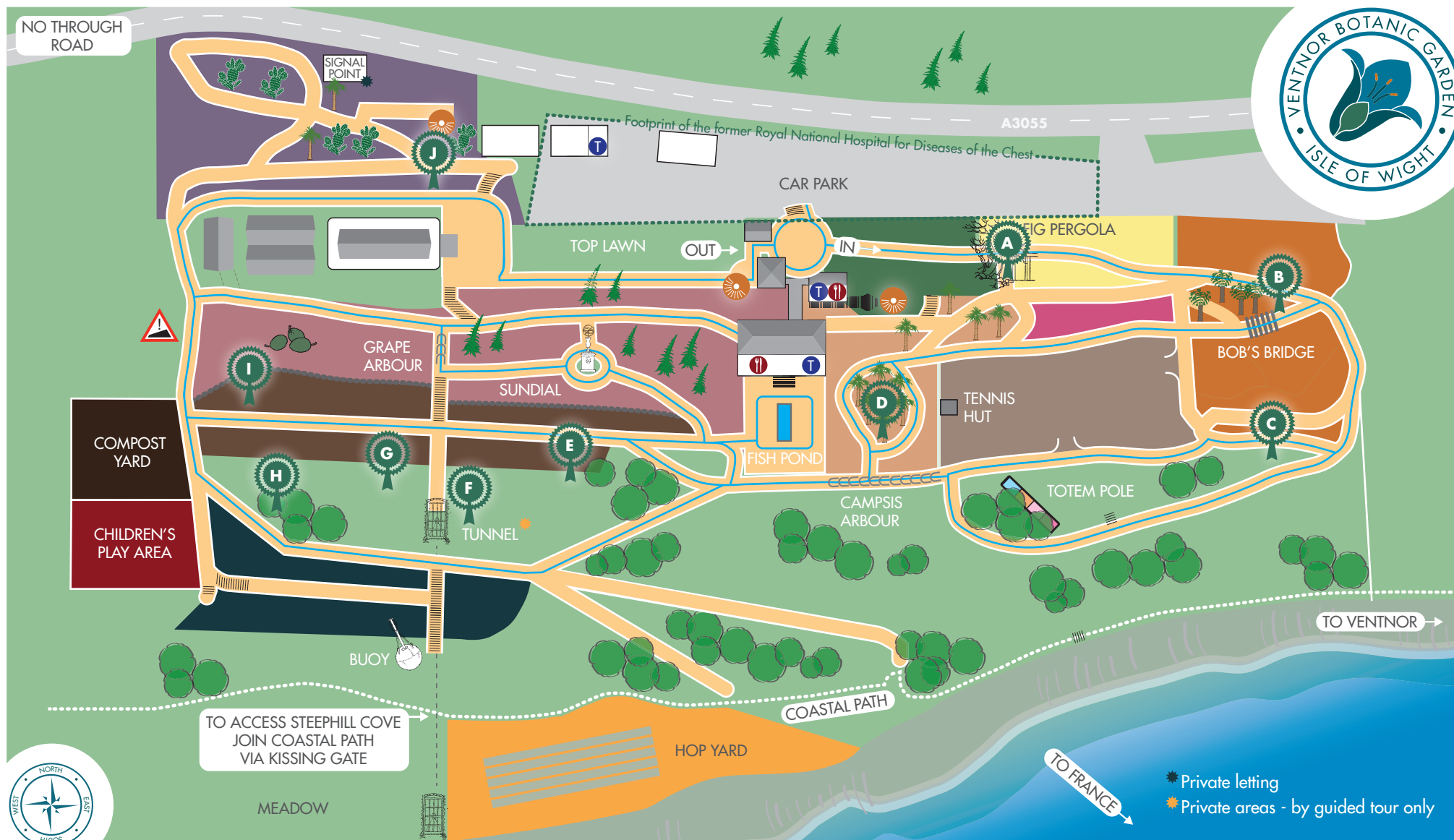
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of your visit for a reward.



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