

BLACKNESS CASTLE

A visit to Blackness castle is one of the finest experiences the Forth has to offer the cruising yachtsman. By kind permission of Historic Scotland visitors may use the refurbished castle pier. Arriving by sea, landing on the concrete pier head, walking the jetty under the towering battlements and entering the gloomy courtyard via the draw bridge the visitor is enveloped in the atmosphere of this formidable fortification, royal castle, former state prison and munitions depot.

At the pier entrance, devoid of cars and other accompaniments of present day living, the visitor glimpses the effect this bastion of authority would have had on his predecessors as they entered its portals. The oppressive confines of thick walls, cobble stones and narrow stairways serve to heighten the magnificence of the views from the airy battlement walkway and the splendour of the great hall. Here one can imagine the revelry accompanied by minstrels in the now missing gallery.

Within this short compass lived the highest and the lowest in the land. The courtyard separates the great hall from 'The Pit', the tide-flushed dungeon in the North Tower.

An attractive Historic Scotland guidebook available from the shop and Historic Scotland's website tells the story of the castle and points to Linlithgow Palace four miles from Blackness.

http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/index/shop/product_detail.htm?productid=171

This guidebook provides much interesting background and includes a book list for further reading. A visit to the Palace complements the Castle, filling in many of the Royal associations. Castle and Palace were linked by trade with Blackness harbour.

The elegant simplicity of the ironwork of the late Victorian jetty and the pier head crane deserve an appreciative look. Apart from its visual appeal and functionality it has already had twice the life of the Bailey bridge recently removed from the Isle of May and the pier has its feet in the sea. Historic Scotland has made a very pleasing job of the refurbishment.

For those wishing to visit the Palace or do some shopping a First Bus, number 49, serves Bo'ness, Blackness and Linlithgow with 8 buses per day, Monday to Saturday, no Sunday service. <http://www.firstgroup.com>

From April to September the castle is open 7 days a week, 09:30 – 18:30, last entry 18:00 but it is best to check these times with site staff. Winter opening hours are 9.30-16.30, last entry 16.00 Mon, Tues, Wed, Sat and Sun only.

Approach, mooring and anchoring

Admiralty chart 737, 1:15,000

Imray C27, 1:77,000

OS Landranger Map, sheet 65, 1:50,000

See also the chartlet, photograph and entry for Blackness in the Forth Yacht Clubs' Association Pilot Handbook, third edition 2000, sections 4-12 to 4-14.

The castle pier dries 1.0 metres on mud and stones and the approach is free of off lying dangers. The usual cautions to berthing on a pier in a tideway apply. The pier has little shelter and is best viewed as a fair weather stop for an hour or so either side of high water. Those wishing to stay longer are advised to anchor off or dry out alongside Blackness town pier. Anchoring is permitted in the triangular box off Blackness and in a larger area to the East of the castle, see the charts for details and note the cable marker to the East of the pier. A wide anchoring exclusion zone stretches across the river from the castle area where three submarine cables cross. They do not run straight across the river but snake about, following the shallowest submarine contours.

To avoid the castle reef on the East side of the pier keep North of an East – West line through the pierhead.

The pier is fendered by vertical square timbers so small craft are advised to use a fender board to avoid their fenders slipping between the timbers.

Yachts can moor to bollards on the pier. The pier head is relatively short so weights for mooring warps are useful. The dolphins to the West of the pier, shown on older editions of chart 737, have been removed.

When alongside the pier please phone the Steward on 01506 834807 to notify him of your arrival and walk through the castle to the shop at the main entrance to buy your tickets. Use of the pier is entirely at the user's own risk. Care is necessary with ones footing on the pier head as it is well used as a sea bird roost. The pier head is fenced off for the safety of shore side visitors and the gate is kept locked. Those with long legs can step over the fence, otherwise on request the Steward will come and unlock the gate when he is able to leave the shop.

The tidal range of the Forth and height of this pier means that if a boat rolls to the wake of a passing merchant ship its cross trees could be at risk. It is therefore recommended that the pier only be used for an hour or so either side of high water and large fenders and a fender board are deployed to hold the boat off the pier. This timing also minimises the amount of ladder climbing for crews.

Boats rafting up on the pier should be well separated by large fenders to avoid damage to stanchions from the roll induced by the wash of merchant vessels. Mooring bow to stern is suggested so that masts do not interfere when boats roll. It is recommended that rafted up boats are not left unattended. The river channel is especially busy around high water with traffic to and from Grangemouth docks.

Revised 21 January 2008