

THE LATE MR MARK WILLIAM NORMAN

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One of the most interesting personalities that Ventnor has ever known passed away early on Saturday morning. We refer of course to the death of Mr Mark William Norman, who had attained we believe, the age of 92, and was the oldest resident in the town. For some time it had been apparent that the end could not be far off, and though up to about a fortnight before his death he was able to take his customary exercise, it was plainly evident that the form, once so straight and vigorous, was becoming daily - and indeed almost perceptibly - weaker and more bent. There is no doubt that the end had been hastened by recent sorrow. A little more than a month ago he lost his youngest son John, and a few weeks earlier a favourite grand-child died, and these seemed to be great shocks to him. From his earliest years Mr Norman had to fight his way into the world, and his career, if it could be written in detail, would read more like a romance, than an account of real life.

His parents both died when he was young, and he could never ascertain their burial place, though he made efforts to do so. He supposed his father to be an Irish gentleman, who had left Ireland about the time of the rebellion in 1798. His father was a butler in a distinguished family, and his mother belonged to Niton, where it is thought, he was born, although it is also stated that he was born in London. However that may be, it is certain he was in London when he was very young and when his mother died he was left largely to his own resources, getting a living as best he could. It is not, therefore, to be wondered at, that thus early he gave evidence of that dogged determination which characterised his after life.

In his early teens he trudged the whole distance from London to Portsmouth and made his way to his grand-mother's cottage at Newchurch. Then after a time he enlisted on the training ship, St. Vincent, but the life not being to his liking, he ran away rendering himself liable to very severe punishment. Returning to London again, he found employment on a collier plying between ports on the East Coast, and very nearly experienced shipwreck. Afterwards he was engaged in towing timber from Portsmouth to Ventnor. His life was a wandering one, and he happened to be in Newark when Mr. Gladstone was first returned to Parliament. Of this election he could give a graphic description. Eventually he settled in the Island, and at first obtained a livelihood in hawking fish, walking almost daily from Ventnor to Newport and back. He remembered well the wreck of the ill-fated Claredon off the Isle of Wight, and was a witness of the wreckers stripping the bodies of the hapless dead. This was in the year 1836 and he has vividly described the scene more than once in these columns. In the same year he was employed in the erection of St. Catherine's Parish Church. Finally he opened a small fish shop in Ventnor and aided by his excellent wife, built up a business of remunerative proportions.

Although Mr Norman's early education necessarily consisted of little beyond the three "R"s, he had yet a thirst after knowledge, which remained with him to the end of his life. Whilst living in Newchurch, for instance, he was said to have read every book in the village and the Bible three times. When he was a young lad in London, he devoured the books at the booksellers who showed him kindness in this respect, and he had a passion for theatres and law courts, which to him were an education. He was a man who thought entirely for himself, and never swallowed anyone else's opinions unless he could assimilate them with his own. Once a conclusion was arrived at, he was as firm as a rock, and it seemed as if no amount of argument could ever change his opinion. But there is no doubt that his opinions were honest ones, and were never formed without full consideration. He had little sympathy for the frivolities of life. In his early days he had to face life in its most serious aspect, and he had little patience with those who, in his view, wasted their leisure in pleasure instead of in acquiring information or mental improvement. Not, however, that he objected to reasonable recreation, for sometimes he himself would sing - and he had a good tenor voice - or he would entertain his friends with a hornpipe, at which he was very proficient. He also learnt the art of self-defence, and could generally hold his own in good company. For very, very many years Mr Norman's chief pleasure was the study of geology. How many miles he traversed in the pursuit of his favourite pastime it would be difficult to estimate - it must have been thousands, and there is no doubt that he acquired a very extensive knowledge of the crust formation of the Isle of Wight. He collected a large number of fossils, some of them rare and valuable, and many years ago he presented a collection to the Ventnor and Bonchurch Literary Institution (of which he was appointed Hon. Curator) all being accurately named and described. The collection is there now, and Mr. Norman regarded it with a good deal of personable pride. By subscription he in 1887 published 'A Geological Guide to the Isle of Wight', a book which was favourably reviewed by scientific papers, and in addition to this he was a constant contributor to the local papers and Geological Society's Magazine, both on geological and antiquarian subjects. Being fond of acquiring knowledge himself he was anxious that others should extend their information likewise, and this is shown by the fact that he attempted to form young men's reading clubs at some of the Inns in the town, and would attend himself in the evening and read books or papers to those gathered there. He was a staunch Liberal, and held very strong views. He was a sincere sympathiser with the Chartists, and during the time of the Chartist Movement, he addressed several meetings on the Island on the subject. He had a most retentive memory, an admirable analytical mind, and high powers of description, and as a reader of character once said, had he had the opportunity of a good education, he would in all probability ranked amongst our cleverest men. He had perhaps, a gruff way of expressing himself, yet it was but the hard shell that held the softer kernel. He had a dry, quiet and often caustic humour, and his arrows always found their mark, for he could read men with accuracy, knew their weaknesses and failings, and could 'score' off them accordingly. He could express his thoughts on paper to with facility and when correspondent for Hampshire papers, he criticised the doings

of the Town Commissioners as fearlessly and freely with his pen as he was wont to do with his tongue, and to such effect on one occasion that he was expelled from the meeting. But the victory of the Commissioners was very short lived. Such indignation was expressed by the inhabitants and the local papers that almost at the next meeting the Commissioners decided that their proceedings should be open to the public, and the meetings of the local authority have remained open to the public ever since.

Mr Norman was No 3 on the books of the Hambrough Lodge of Oddfellows. Indeed by age he was the oldest member, but Bros. T. Gangh and Herridge senior are older on the books, being original members of the Lodge. Bro. Norman joined the Hambrough Lodge about the year 1847, obtaining his clearance from the Yarborough (Newport) Lodge. He passed through the various offices successfully and for many years was the lecture master. At the time of his death he was the Treasurer, and had held that post faithfully for a period of 30 years. On three separate occasions, we believe, he was a member of the Local Board, being first elected in the early 70's when 'economy' was the 'battle cry'. He had presided over some of the meetings but he was never Chairman. In those days the meetings of our Local Authority were not conducted in such an orderly manner as they are now, partaking more of the character of the present day meetings of the Shanklin District Council. Mr Norman contended for what he regarded were the best interests of the town, and served the ratepayers faithfully according to his light. A man with strong characteristics could not go through the world without roughly rubbing shoulders with some people but, we believe, even those least of friends never questioned his honesty of purpose.

For many years he was a member of the Ventnor Detachment of Volunteers and rose to the rank of Sergeant. Seeing that there was little chance of promotion for those under him, he voluntarily went back to the ranks. He was an excellent shot, and one year was second in the Core Cup Competition open to the whole battalion. The Pelham Cup, we believe, he won on two occasions and he gained besides a large number of other prizes.

Mr Norman's married life extended over a period of considerably more than 50 years, and during that time he and his wife were never separated for a single day. They were very devoted to one another and much sympathy will be felt for the aged widow in her great sorrow.

One who knew him wrote: "Mark Norman resided in the town during its 'village hood' and watched it grow into a town boasting a District Council, a Pier and Electric Light. I first new Mr Norman in the forties, and he then resided in a small thatched cottage in the High Street. He kept a fish stall beneath the shade of a handsome weeping willow. The stall stood on trestles. Having sold a fish Mr Norman would take it and clean it in the stream of clean water that ran past on its way to the mill and stream. As time went on he was able to build a house near the stall, and continued to carry on his business for many years without opposition. His kindness of heart was hidden beneath a somewhat brusque and gruff exterior, and through this crust people were often unable to peer."

Mourners were Frank and William Norman (sons), Mr J. G. Ford (brother-in-law) and Mr H. F. Grant