



Knight's Library

For over 150 years the people of our area have been avid readers of library books, and in the nineteenth century most of these were borrowed from *Knight's Circulating Library* at 147 and 149 Ventnor High Street [a completely separate enterprise from *Knight's Wine and Music Warehouse* a little way down the High Street at 97 and 99].

Founded in 1849 by Stephen Knight, the first Knight's bookshop, shown here, was in the upper part of Ventnor High Street. Situated between Bonchurch with its authors, poets and wealthy residents, and Ventnor with its hotels, shops and cosmopolitan visitors, Knight's carved out for itself a vital role in the cultural and social life of the town. According to author Henry Stacpoole, there would sometimes be as many as sixteen carriages waiting outside, each complete with coachman and footman, while the owners were inside reading papers in the news room or choosing novels from the Library, their children looking at picture books.



In 1854 Knight's advertised that the Times newspaper could be borrowed by customers (available to be 'lent to read'); Enos Urry, one of Knight's employees, remembered how when he was a boy one of his jobs was to meet the horse coach on its arrival from Ryde, collect the Times, and leave copies for half an hour at readers' houses, before calling back to collect the paper and deliver it to the next customer. The shop also boasted '... A weekly parcel of books from London every Thursday afternoon'. This parcel was supplied by Mudies, the huge enterprise in Bloomsbury in London, which provided books for circulating libraries all over England. Customers could borrow unlimited books, all the latest titles, to take home to read one at a time, for a subscription of a guinea a year. Mudies bought thousands of books and had enormous influence on public reading habits and the publishing business. It was easier for new authors to get their work in print if they wrote the books Mudies wanted: nothing shocking or unsuitable for middle class families, and, if possible, novels produced in three volumes, so that three different customers could be reading it at the same time.

Knight's in Ventnor, with its wealthy clientele, was much more than a bookshop and library. Bart Russell, one time editor of the Mercury, wrote that 'Old Mr Knight had got together a small band of craftsmen who could bear comparison in the arts with larger firms on the south coast. The book binding, illuminated hand-leather and silver work of George Yates [in Knight's bookbinding department] was known all over the South of England.' Knight's also published its own local interest reference books and a gazetteer, as well as selling fancy goods and toys, and (inevitably for Ventnor at that time) it had a 'Pianoforte and Music Warehouse, with pianofortes on Hire on the Three-Years System or otherwise, and kept in Tune Free of Charge'. But books were always their main business, and at one time Knight's had three branches - a second Ventnor High Street shop (seen behind the charabanc in the photograph above, and now *Seasons*) and one in the Advertiser Building in Church Street, on the corner of Hambrough Road, shown below.



By the late nineteenth century public libraries were beginning to open, but these were often aimed at working people rather than middle class ladies reading novels. The Ventnor & Bonchurch Literary and Scientific Institute, opposite Knights at 147 and 149 High Street, housed the Jubilee Free Library and Reading Room which had over 800 books but was only open in the evenings, 7 pm until 9 pm, so Knight's still ruled in Ventnor.

When Stephen Knight died in 1878 his son William ran the business and on his death his widow managed things until their son William Jack Knight took over.

In 1943 the shop in the Upper High Street was badly damaged in a bombing raid. The staff had to move with the stock temporarily to the other High Street Branch, and although they moved back after the war, Knight's days were numbered. The bookbinding department had closed when George Yates died in 1929 - it was impossible to replace him. Penguin Books, founded in the 1930s, provided cheap paperbacks for sale at prices most people could afford, and in 1940 the Literary Institute opposite Knight's became the Seely Public Library - later to become our own Ventnor Library - providing a genuine free service to the readers of the town. In 1959, after more than 100 years in the hands of the same family, Knight's was sold to NSS Newsagents.



Lesley Telford, *Ventnor & District Local History Society*, Sources: records in our archives and Fay Brown's local history indexes (first published in the *South Wight Chronicle* 2018, updated 2020)



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www.ventnorheritage.org.uk email: info@ventnorheritage.org.uk

