



Sharpe's Annual Outing, circa 1905



Alfred James Sharpe established a drapery and furnishing store on Ventnor High Street in 1893. Starting first with one shop, the business was soon expanded to occupy four different sets of premises, including a new purpose-built establishment on the corner of Spring Hill and Grove Road, erected in 1905 (now the home of Ventnor Heritage Centre). By 1914, the total number of staff employed had risen to almost 30 and the High Street premises had become a small department store.

Alfred Sharpe was plainly an astute businessman, but he was also a generous participant in the life of the town, holding numerous positions of responsibility over the years. He also believed in rewarding hard-working staff, for he regularly organised a summer outing for the shop staff, the photograph above showing what looks to be a waggonette ready to leave from outside the High Street store around 1905. The Heritage Centre has in its collection a surprising number of pictures of such annual Sharpe's outings, with motor charabancs starting to provide the means of transport by the 1920s.

We do not know the names of any of the people on board the vehicle, nor of the family standing on the pavement to watch the departure. We do not know, either, where the vehicle was destined to travel, although a fair guess is that it was westward through the Undercliff to Blackgang and possibly beyond. In later years, the trips were often described as 'picnic parties', probably taking place on Sundays or bank holidays.

The High Street store continued trading until 1982 and was for many decades a centre-piece of Ventnor shopping. An account of life working there was published in the *South Wight Chronicle* in two past issues dated 9th and 16th July 2015. Set in the 1960s, Margaret Longbottom and Jenny Nigh recalled tales that might have come out of the BBC sitcom: 'Are you being served'. The articles can still be read on Ventnor Heritage Centre's website.

One of the intriguing features of this particular photograph is the way it shows the gas lighting globes that once hung from many shops in the town. The ones belonging to Sharpe's store are suspended from wrought iron brackets fixed above the shop signage. On George Oliver's boot and shoe shop to the right, they hang from pipework set much lower down. At night-time, the High Street must have taken on a rather eerie atmosphere, as gaslight at the time always gave out a somewhat yellowy hue. Oliver's store began here in 1895 and continued to figure on the High Street until well towards the end of the twentieth century.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

www.ventnorheritage.org.uk / telephone 855407

