



Riviera Boarding House: where Alexei Tolstoy once stayed



The picture above appeared in one of Mate's Guides to Ventnor and was taken about 1900. It formed part of a full-page advertisement for the boarding house and is plainly posed, with visitors and domestic staff neatly assembled at vantage points on the garden terraces and on the first-floor balcony. However, the photographer has accidentally captured a few individuals who happened to be walking on the Esplanade, including a finely dressed woman on the left who appears to have been diverted by the tier of spectators, for she has turned her head towards them.

'Riviera' was a later name for this boarding house which dated from the 1840s. Over the nineteenth century, it was known as 'Marine Villa'. For several decades, it was run by James and Ann Dashwood, James being the keeper of the Marine Hotel Tap on Belgrave Road. When James died in 1864, his widow continued to run the villa which was variously described as a lodging-house and as apartments. In 1867, she re-married, her new husband, Thomas Vanner, an innkeeper from Ryde. By the 1891 Census, sadly, she is recorded as a widow again, but still the proprietor of the villa. Even more sadly, she had suffered the loss of two sons (Arthur and William Dashwood, aged just 27 and 29 respectively). They had died the same week in May 1890.

One of the features that once marked Ventnor out as a distinctive resort was the cosmopolitan profile of its visitors. In 1913, Gertrude Cox, whilst staying at St. Augustine Villa, recorded that there were seven different nationalities among the nineteen house guests, including a Russian lady whose husband was Canadian. Russians, it seems, developed a particular fondness for Ventnor, with various writers, poets and radical political thinkers from that country spending time in the resort. Ann Dashwood, at Marine Villa, for example, was host to the Russian poet Count Alexei Tolstoy, his new wife and his young family, in the early 1860s. In fact, in the year 1860, Ventnor appears, on one authority, to have become a hive of Russian tourists and emigrés. Among them was Ivan Turgenev who stayed at Belinda House, just along from Marine Villa, for three weeks, together with Pavel Annenkov as his house-guest. The two had initially lodged at Rock Cottage on Belgrave Road, but had been asked to leave by the proprietor on account of Annenkov's penchant for smoking strong tobacco. It was while in Ventnor that Turgenev conceived of the plot for his novel *Fathers and Sons*. A few years before, in 1854 and 1855, the Russian political thinker, Alexander Herzen and his family, had stayed at Ventnor. On the second visit, they stayed at St. Augustine Villa along with a governess, Malvida von Meysenbug who was a trained artist and made some attractive local sketches.

In August 1919, the 'Riviera' boarding house came up for auction in Ventnor and details reveal that it was quite a sizeable property, spread over three floors. There were six bedrooms with bay windows overlooking the bay, and then a further five bedrooms. There was a first-floor bathroom and a W.C. on each floor. On the ground floor were dining, drawing and smoking rooms, along with all usual domestic offices. There were gardens both front and back, together with rear access on to Marine Parade. In 1924, the business was in the hands of Mr and Mrs C. A. Smith who had styled it as a 'Pension' in their publicity. By 1933, though, the same proprietors described it as a private hotel boasting gas fires in bedrooms, ending the housemaid's daily chore of cleaning out grates and carrying up coal.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, especially those of the late Fay Brown.