



## The White Lion, Niton



A fine photo of a group of men outside the Inn, probably dating from the 1920s. Three of the Inn's staff can be seen standing towards the rear, while on the right nearest the camera, the man in the peaked cap may well be the driver of a charabanc. It is plainly high summer and charabanc tours, starting from Ventnor, were a favourite among Island visitors and also among local clubs and societies.

The Inn has a history that goes back at least to the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. A tenant in the 1830s was George Wilfred Bright who Ventnor's famous diarist, Mark Norman, described as of middle height, heavy of features and broad shouldered. He had previously held the post of signalman on St. Catherine's Down during the Napoleonic Wars. In the event of a French invasion fleet being sighted, a flagstaff provided for communication by day and a lighted tar barrel by night. The alert would then be relayed via a long line of signal stations to the centre of government. Mark Norman had obtained work at the Inn as an ostler in about 1835, at the tender age of 11 or 12. He started in late autumn when there was relatively little demand from travellers, which was just as well since the lad confessed to knowing little about horses and being somewhat afraid of them. However, he did settle into the job and soon managed to rub down and feed them without problem. He lodged over the coach house where soldiers slept. They were billeted at the Inn as part of their role in acting as messengers for the Revenue Department, Niton and surrounding villages having long been active in the smuggling trade.

The part of the Inn that figures in the photo seems to have been a relatively late addition to the White Lion's buildings. The oldest portion was round to the left (west) of the picture. It was of an altogether lower scale and was once thatched. Here there was a large room in which a Midsummer ball was held, always popular with the young men and women of the neighbourhood. An old fisherman with large horny hands managed to provide music on an ancient fiddle, and despite the apparent lack of nimble fingers, he accomplished the task so well that he performed the same role over many years. The revellers practised country dances most of the time, with 10 to 20 couples taking part.

By the time the photo was taken, the White Lion was in the ownership of Mew, Langton & Co., the Newport brewer.

*Ventnor & District Local History Society*: Michael Freeman. A fuller story of the Inn's history can be found contained in the Society's publication: *Inns and Ale: Bonchurch to Chale* which can be purchased via the website.