

A young bank clerk arrives in Ventnor in the early 1950s

Ron Bunnett was just 15 years old when he joined the National Provincial Bank in September 1939, straight from leaving school. He was hired as a temporary clerk at the Taunton branch on a wage of £1 a week. Some three years on, though, he was called up into the Army and it was not until 1947 that he was able to return to the Bank. The custom in banking in those days was for staff to follow (in Ron's words) a kind of nomadic existence that took him to National Provincial branches in Devon, Sussex and Jersey. Then, in February 1951, he found he had been assigned to Ventnor. So one winter Sunday evening in early March, he arrived at Portsmouth Harbour station to board the 6.35 pm ferry to Ryde. The service was operated by the nationalised British Railways and three new screw vessels had been commissioned to provide the regular sailings: the *Brading*, *Shanklin* and *Southsea*. Once disembarked at Ryde Pier, there was a short wait for the Sunday train service to Ventnor, made up of just three non-corridor coaches, pulled by one of the near ubiquitous 02 class tank engines. There were few on the train and, on arrival in Ventnor at 8.12 pm, Ron was struck by the misty but mild gloom that the few street lamps did little to alleviate, though he could plainly hear the murmur of waves breaking on the shore below. The Bank had arranged 'digs' for him in a home on St. Alban's Gardens and, more by luck than judgement, he found No 12, *Magdalene*, to be warmly welcomed by Mrs. Collins, a war widow.



At *Magdalene*, Ron was to take the place of a clerk named John O'Keefe from the Ventnor branch of the Midland Bank who was being transferred to Portland. It was John who accompanied Ron down into town the next morning, showing him the route via the St. Alban's steps, all 83 of them! Ron would soon be negotiating these steps four times a day, for he always went back to his 'digs' for lunch. He thought he might lose a few pounds with all this daily exercise, but Mrs. Collins's cooking was so good, even in the face of food rationing, that he actually gained weight.

Ron was 26 years old when he started in Ventnor and his annual salary was £345, clearly a significant step up from the £1 a week aged 15. We do not know much about his day-to-day bank work, but the manager of Ventnor's National Provincial branch was Douglas George Timms who had been promoted from Ryde. What we do know about, however, is the way bank employees tended to get volunteered for service with local organisations, often with the individual concerned not even being asked. So one day Ron discovered that he was treasurer of the local scout group, a post apparently held by the bank clerk whose position he now occupied. Fortunately, it did not prove too onerous a job and he was greatly helped by fellow committee members. The scout group was happily solvent, its primary income deriving from the annual 'Bob-a-job week'. The group had a campsite close to Trinity Church that had traditionally provided additional funding through letting it to visiting scout troops. However, the outbreaks of poliomyelitis (infantile paralysis) that had marred these early post-war years meant that such income had largely collapsed, in much the way that it also had adverse effects on Ventnor's recovering tourist trade.

Ron's sojourn in Ventnor proved to be a short one, for by June 1952, he found himself posted back to the mainland again, this time in Reading. So no more climbing of those formidable steps.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, photo courtesy of Colin Beavis



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