



## A 'Boy's Own' story from the 1920s and 1930s



Leafing through the late Fay Brown's index files recently, I came across an account published in The Maple Society's newsletter (no. 6) of August 1986 (see *note below*). It was by Albert Taylor who grew up around Wheeler's Bay (pictured above), attended Albert Street School, was apprenticed with Ingrams, had a short spell in war service, then returned to work for Ventnor U.D.C., before moving to the mainland in 1949. The following is a transliterated version of what Albert wrote.

He recalled with pleasure summer days in the Bay when he and other young lads would dive from Ballast Rock or off the piles of the breakwater. They would fish for bullheads and wrasse with home-made lines, always in high hopes (but little expectation) that they might catch something larger: small bass, conger, mullet or flat fish. More likely was that they would catch a 'king-crab' as it scuttled along the sand or around the rocks. At other times, they would sail home-made boats along the creek that ran between the flat sandstone rock and 'Dog Rock' when the tide was on the ebb. On stormy days, they would dive through the breakers, wallowing in the surf as it broke upon the beach, feeling the warmth of raindrops on their backs against the relative cold of the sea.

Sometimes, the lads would pause from their play and look out at the many ships that passed off the shore: battleships, ocean liners, paddle-steamers and tramps. The names of all of them tripped off tongues with ease: Hood, Warspite or Rodney perhaps on exercise; the Olympian Majestic, Mauretania and Berengaria on their transatlantic crossings; the ships of the P & O line, black-hulled with buff superstructure, that would appear every Thursday afternoon bound for London; the broad-beamed paddlers like Bournemouth Queen and Lorna Doone, churning their way past, packed with day trippers; the colliers Pitwines and William Cash on the coal run from Goole to Poole. One of the biggest thrills was to see an ocean-going yacht under full sail as she turned on an outward tack, gunwhales all awash as the wind once again caught the sails. Sometimes, the surface of a flat sea would suddenly darken as a shoal of mackerel surfaced. For a while, the sea would look as though a gentle breeze was ruffling it. But then all would be turmoil as a thrasher shark struck the shoal and the sea foamed.

Occasionally, they would all slip away from the Bay and wander round to Ventnor, especially on Regatta Day. Here they would stop to watch the antics of the organ grinder's monkey as the creature pranced around on top of the barrel. They paused to watch with glee as Bill Gee (Mike Gee's father) or Fred White made unsuccessful attempts to overcome the lubricity of the greasy pole. They saw the rowing races, the water polo match, the water battle fought with paper bags filled with soot or flour. They watched with envy as Spencer's motorboats ferried well-off visitors out to the destroyer anchored offshore. They stopped to listen to Jimmy the Clown on the Esplanade and then spent what few pence they had at Mr. Burden's confectionery kiosk at the eastern end of the Esplanade. Finally, as the evening drew in, the lads would all seek the best vantage point for watching the firework display, the sky soon a vast array of bursting rockets. Then, finally, the band would play 'God Save the King', whereupon all would trudge off home to bed.

The more one reads accounts of this kind, the more one registers how young lives in earlier times were never dull. There may have been little money to buy the playthings and gadgets that are associated with twenty-first century youth, but this did nothing to hinder ingenuity or energy. Pastimes were simple or home-made, though potentially no less fun for being so.

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*(The Maple Society was founded in Bonchurch over thirty years ago, the name taken from the maple trees found around the Pond there. The Society published a regular newsletter for a time and had members all around the world. The Heritage Centre has a small collection of these newsletters in its archive.)*