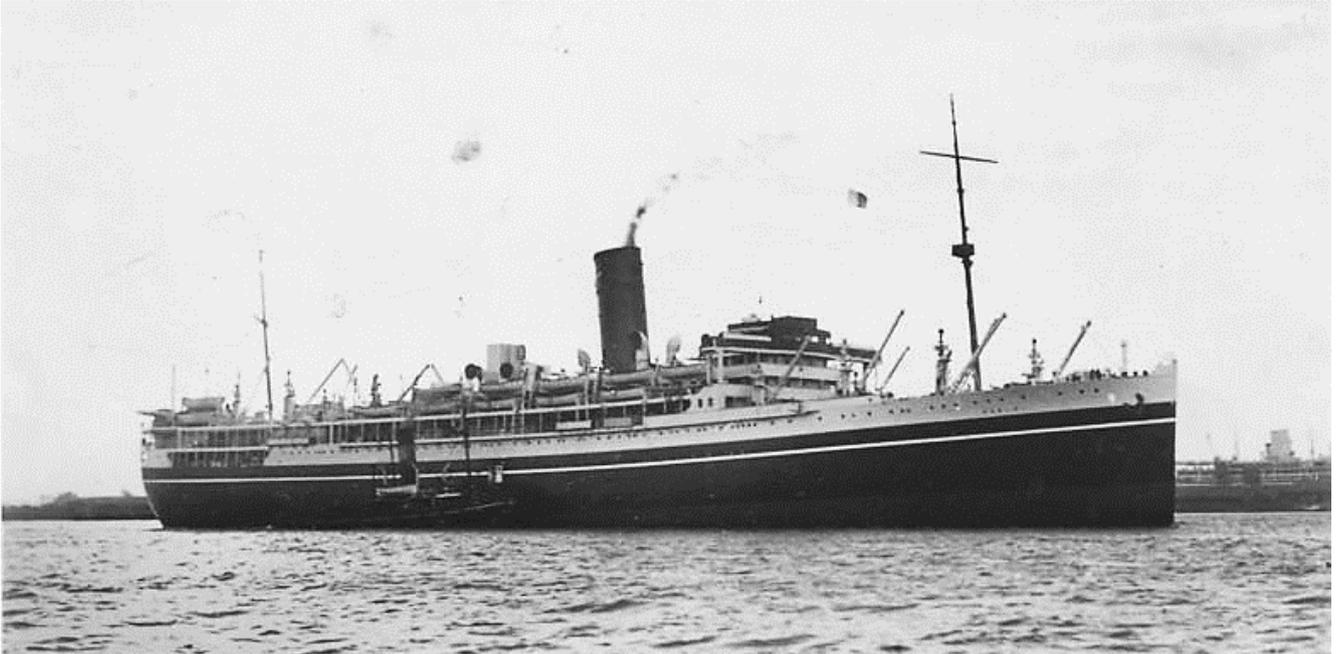




Passage to Tasmania



It is early December 1949 and winter time approaches in Ventnor. The town remains somewhat forlorn, even though it is four years since war ended. The country at large is near bankrupt, rationing still prevails and it is hard to buy all kinds of goods. If you had a large, growing family the future seemed bleak. However, there was a possibility of escape. You could emigrate to Australia under the 'Assisted Passage' scheme. From Tilbury Docks in London, the P & O shipping line's S.S *Ranchi* (16,974 gross registered tons) would transport you 'down under' on a six to eight week voyage. You would arrive to the Australian summer, but have to survive passage down the English Channel and its western approaches in the face of winter storms, as well as passage across the even more notorious Bay of Biscay. Once into the 'Med', though, the curse of seasickness would quickly fade.

On the 3rd December 1949, Tom Harding, a well-known and capable Ventnor townsman, departed for Tasmania on board the S.S *Ranchi*. With him went his wife Marian and six children, along with his wife's mother. Tom was a carpenter and joiner by trade and was later to set up as a builder based at Trinity View, the works once run by Albert Sims. He had lived through the Great War as a youngster, experienced the inter-war economic slump, and been in a reserved occupation over the Second World War. Re-starting his building business from 1945, with all the shortages in Britain under austerity, was likely one reason for emigrating. But his family were also part of a growing cohort of Ventnorians who, over the years, had settled in Tasmania. They were actually going to the home of Tom Harding's uncle, Austin Channing, who had emigrated in 1909-1910 and become a fruit farmer near Devonport on Tasmania's north coast, facing the Bass Strait. The Hardings eventually settled at Penguin, westward along the coast from Devonport. Here they found a climate slightly warmer in both winter and summer than that of the Island's Undercliff. And Penguin, in fact, had been first settled one hundred years before by emigrants from Liverpool.

The S.S. *Ranchi* was built in 1925 for the India service. It was commandeered in 1939 to become an armed merchant cruiser and, later, it became a troopship. Returned to the shipping line after the war, it was adapted for use in the Australian emigrant service. From being a luxury liner in the 1920s and 1930s, it was turned into a much more spartan ship, with 10-berth bunked cabins, women and children in one part of the ship and men in another. The food was fairly basic, but one young child who travelled out on the *Ranchi* in 1951 recalled beef tea being provided to passengers in the heavy seas of Biscay and currant buns being offered at 'elevenses'. The Hardings were not the only Ventnor family emigrating to Australia on that particular voyage. Mr and Mrs Patrick Sheehan (née Mary Millmore) were also departing the town. The *Isle of Wight Mercury* wished the two families 'bon voyage'.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, including the memoir of life in Ventnor written by Tom Harding (D.T.W. Harding) in his later years.