



The Cascade, Ventnor

The picture here is reproduced from one of those tiny photographic prints that were so common in the years between the two world wars. It is a view of the Lower Cascade as seen through the archway under battery walk. What is striking about the image is the sheer volume of water coursing over the rocks. In 1905, it is recorded that 1,250,000 gallons were flowing down every day, and readers may wonder how this compares with the 'trickle' that is visible there now.

The Cascade and its adjacent gardens were constructed in 1902-3 by the then town surveyor, Edgar James Harvey. It replaced an area commonly known as the 'cabbage patch', in effect an untidy piece of waste ground, once a chalk pit, and, from time to time, variously let out for cultivation, including a watercress bed. Well versed in the study of geology and water supply, Harvey brought in weathered sandstone from Pelham Woods to form the main features of the two-tier cascade. He then oversaw the planting of the gardens, the emphasis on exotic species, in other words exploiting the sheltered and humid suntrap that the Cascade area forms. In 1905, not long after the waterfalls and gardens had been created, the local Electric Light and Power Company erected 60 small electric lanterns to be illuminated from Easter to the end of September.



Although the project had not been without critics, it did not take long for the Cascade and gardens to become a source of admiration among residents and visitors alike. In 1908, one commented on the fine specimen of an Aloe tree that was in full bloom for the first time. In 1913 it was a 'foreign palm' that seems to have caught the eye, replete with bell-shaped pure white flowerheads (probably a Yucca). In 1938, it was the startling display of mauve and yellow mesembryanthemums that was stealing the limelight, lining the sides of Shore Hill. The great purple patches were so vivid that one day a lady disembarked from a Red Funnel steamer just to look at them. The flowers opened fully only in the mid-day sun, the name taken from two Greek words meaning 'noon flower'. In the second half of the twentieth century, the exotic plantings of the Cascade rather lost out to the contemporary fashion for annual carpet bedding, but just now, Ventnor Town Council appears on the cusp of re-inventing the Cascade as a Mediterranean garden. Whether they will manage to get more water flowing is another matter!

Michael Freeman (*Ventnor & District Local History Society*). Sources: compiled from files in Ventnor Heritage Museum, including those of the late Fay Brown