



Britannia's Hut being dismantled by Blakes, Longshoremen, 1959



The scene is what was once known as Myrtle Bay, just west of Ventnor Beach and below what is now La Falaise car park. It is dated 1959 and shows members of the Blake family, longshoremen at Ventnor over several generations, dismantling *Britannia's Hut*, the wooden structure on tall stilts that over many years formed the home of Miss Olivia Parkes (locally known as *Britannia*). It had no water supply, no electricity, no sanitation and precarious wooden steps up to it from rocks fifteen feet below.



The hut was built for the Undercliff Swimming Club in the 1880s, at roughly the time the Pier was starting to be rebuilt after the disastrous storm of November 1881. Trehearne & Son, the Southampton firm engaged for the re-building, was commissioned to build the Club's hut for the sum of £40. When the Swimming Club was eventually wound up, the Blakes bought the hut for winter storage of some of their boats. Sometime in the later 1920s, Miss Parkes acquired it and lived in it intermittently for almost 30 years, until the Council forcibly re-housed her in a flat at 47 High Street (locally known as Chaplin's Corner) in November 1958.

In her last years living in the hut, the once sturdy structure had become ramshackle. Much of the glass from the windows had gone, parts of the roof were open to the skies, while the railings on the balcony and on the steps had rotted away. For many years, Miss Parkes walked west along the beach to Flowers Brook and there collected fresh water and did her washing. In the summer of 1958, a reporter from a national newspaper broke her extraordinary story as 'The Old Lady of the Sea'. By this time, Miss Parkes had become reclusive, venturing out only in the evenings, when there were few people about and the holidaymakers had gone. A few kind local souls would check she was about from time to time, especially the boatmen. To try to keep out wind and rain, she had by then erected a tent inside the hut. But this did little to diminish the terror of rough seas and storms. Once, in November 1931, she became marooned after a severe gale. During the night, huge seas had washed away her steps and she was terrified that the entire structure would soon be overwhelmed. A passing errand boy heard her cries for help the next day and, in due course, police and firemen arrived to help her escape to safety.

Miss Parkes died at her High Street flat in January 1962. She is buried in Ventnor Cemetery.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre. The main picture is reproduced by courtesy of Sophie from Blake's Longshoremen's Museum. The smaller image comes from Sharon Champion.