



Donkey Milligan



This striking image is from Blake's Longshoremen's Museum, with Sophie's kind permission. It is one of the best pictures I have seen of Henry Milligan, invariably known as Donkey Milligan and probably the most prominent of the donkey-chair proprietors who operated in Ventnor. He had taken over the business founded by his father in 1894. He was just 26 at the time. In this photo, he looks a man in his thirties, so this gives a rough date of 1905. The clothing worn by the various figures would seem to fit that period. The picture was very likely taken by Digweed who was a top local beach photographer.

Henry Milligan was a carpenter by trade and had worked at the Royal National Hospital and at Steephill Castle. In later years, he became a jobbing gardener and also verger at St. Margaret's Church, Lowtherville, close to his home on Lowtherville Road. As a donkey chair proprietor, he regularly took nursing home patients and other invalids on outings. The passenger in the picture may well be one such example. Milligan was married with two sons and lived until the ripe old age of 94. His wife, Bertha, died aged 61 in 1937, and after his son, Harry, pre-deceased him, he moved to St. Lawrence to live with his surviving son, George, and daughter-in-law.

In the background of the picture, you have a clear view of what was known as Battery Walk, the wide raised pathway that led from the Old Mill at the bottom of Pier Street down to the Esplanade, including the viaduct across the mill stream. Battery Walk was created over 1880-1881, partly during the devastatingly cold and snowy winter that hit the country at the time. According to Joe Grant who, as a boy, worked for the company building it, this proved the hardest winter of his life, for the men had to continue through even the very worst of the bitter weather. Just to the right of the donkey-chair, you can make out the new ornamental garden that had lately been created at the base of the Cascade. The cascade or waterfall itself had been formed in 1902-3 under the direction of the Town Surveyor, Edgar James Harvey. It had involved diverting the old mill stream over tiers of weathered sandstone brought in from Pelham Woods. An elaborate garden had been made around it, so banishing the untidy 'cabbage patch' that had long disfigured the area. The Cascade and its gardens remain today, of course, although the ornamental garden at its outfall has long since disappeared under concrete.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, the photo from Blake's Longshoremen's Museum.



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

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