



A wartime homecoming

This is the account of Mrs. Mabel Norris upon her returning to the Island in the later years of the Second World War. It is an edited version of a piece that first appeared thirty years ago in the newsletter of the local Maple Society.



Mabel was the daughter of Sydney and Mabel Allistone who lived in Ventnor for thirty years and, for much of that time, ran the Palmerston Hotel on Hambrough Road. Sydney and his daughter were among the founder members of the dramatic society known as the Ventnor Players. Sydney was a strong advocate of the building of the new Winter Gardens and his daughter worked for a time at the Post Office as sorting clerk and telegraphist.

Mabel subsequently married and moved to the mainland. Her husband John was in the Navy and, when he left for America to join a new ship later in the war, she decided to leave her home in Rickmansworth and join her parents back on the Island, along with her young children, including a new-born.

'I set off with my little brood and all our clothes. I sent off a big trunk in advance – it only cost two shillings then. I had to get a letter from my parents asking me to

come or I should not have been allowed on the island. It was most carefully guarded. I think it was thought that it could have been a place where the enemy might choose to make a landing. I accomplished the journey very well, people travelling were so nice and helpful, especially men in the forces.'

'My heart got lighter and lighter at the thought of going home and seeing my parents again, and when we eventually arrived and the little train burst out of the long tunnel and into the sunshine of Ventnor station, it sang with joy. There were my parents waiting all smiles to meet us, and to greet the children. The horse-bus was long gone, and we were transported by a rather natty motor bus, in which the driver did not have to get out at the hills and put the drag under the wheels manually. Everywhere looked very deserted, and many of the houses and hotels were shut up and shuttered.'

During the war, the Infants School had been evacuated to Steephill Castle, away from the main focus of enemy air raids. Mabel picks up the story again: 'the little kids were packed up each morning and taken out to the Castle by bus and they had a lovely time playing in the grounds. Then I found a nice little fifteen year old girl, just left school, who was willing to come and look after Lynne (the baby) and take her out in her pram while I was busy. This allowed me to be free to do cooking and cleaning in my parents' hotel, the more so since my mother was by then running her British Restaurant for the troops and for any locals who cared to patronise it. There were nineteen people in the hotel, including our family, and so there was plenty to do. Occasionally, I would give a hand in the Restaurant and, when I heard the army lads asking for home-made cakes, I started baking a hundred rock cakes a day. As they were for the troops, I could requisition all the ingredients, so I made them really big and fruity. We charged one penny each and they had to be rationed to go round. It was not profit-making'.

'Among the troops were some Scots Commandos and the local children were fascinated to watch them drilling on the Esplanade and training on the cliffs. A few were billeted in the hotel. They wore kilts and were sweet to our kids and never any trouble. One stormy Saturday, the commandos had thrown a rope across the wide breach where a one-hundred-foot section of the pier had been removed in 1940 to prevent the enemy using it in an invasion. It was a full November gale and waves were breaking over the pavilion on the pierhead and churning madly ashore. Several men made it safely along the rope, but then it broke and two of them plunged into the turmoil below. After much activity the two were rescued: a real life drama which we witnessed from the hotel's top window'.

The picture here showing the pier with central section removed was of course taken in much calmer conditions than those described in Mabel's story.

