

Frederick Livesay: a Ventnor childhood in the 1880s – part 2

Like all well-to-do Victorian families, the Livesays had a string of servants, as well as a nurse and governess, to cope with their ever-expanding brood. Presiding over the kitchen was the Cook, a 'stout red-faced middle-aged woman, fond of her beer', as Fred recalled. Every morning, housemaids brought up sitzbaths to the older children's bedrooms, together with a can of cold water, but Fred remembered just soaping the water and staying unwashed, enjoying instead the hot tea and slices of bread and butter that also came up with the maid. Later in the day there were more memorable things to eat, including the rich brown plum cake made by Eliza, grandmother's Devonshire cook. It was moist and quite heavy (perhaps due to its lard base) and it would keep for ages. Eliza also made wonderful seedy cake, its ingredients finely balanced: not too much sugar and just enough caraway seeds. Another favourite dish was jam roly-poly, made with butter and steamed in cheesecloth. It was invariably topped with redcurrant jam and a large clot of Eliza's famous Devonshire cream.

The grandmother lived at Sandrock Spring Cottage and when the Livesay family visited on Sundays, they were treated to a great joint of cold beef, a goose or other fowl, also cold, and apple tart for dessert. The family were Plymouth Brethren and no cooking was allowed on Sundays, but Eliza always left large potatoes to bake in the great coal-fired range before the family left for their Sunday morning meeting.

We have no picture in our archives of Sandrock Spring Cottage, except for this one of the devastation caused by the 1978 landslide - you can still



see the Swiss style balcony and also the deep decorated bargeboards of the roof overhang. We would be very interested if anyone has a picture of the undamaged building.

Grandmother kept Jersey cows at her cottage whereas in his fields off Madeira Road Fred's father kept Guernseys. The latter gave ample milk and cream for the growing family, but there was nothing left for butter. So once a week, Fred's Aunt Fanny would come over from Sandrock with butter in round golden pats of one pound each, imprinted with a specially carved wooden stamp depicting a view of Sandrock Spring Cottage. Fred's mother also had a maiden aunt who lived in Higher Bonchurch and there the family would sometimes retreat to share cold loin of lamb for luncheon. Back at Cromartie, though, loin of lamb was far too skimpy a dish for so large a family and so the Livesays feasted off boiled leg-of-mutton with capers and onion sauce. Living by the sea, fresh fish was also a frequent table offering and Fred recalled the fish vendor who most days brought his 'low-wheeler' along Madeira Road, chanting his catch.

One of the somewhat startling things about Fred's father was the way, although exhibiting all the outward signs of ostensible wealth, he was often extensively indebted. The house, Cromartie, the money to build it having been a wedding present to Fred's mother, was soon mortgaged to meet the growing household spending. Even though John Livesay had a successful architectural practice as well as income from investment in several Ventnor businesses, it was not unusual for bailiffs to arrive at Cromartie when interest payments fell in arrears. Fred remembered how grandfather invariably bailed his son out. Keeping up the appropriate social front was paramount to this class of Victorians. They also, perhaps, had a rather more fatalistic attitude to life, especially when it could be so suddenly cut off by fatal disease. John Livesay died aged just 57 in 1898.

Michael Freeman, *Ventnor & District Local History Society*. Sources: J.F.B Livesay, *The Making of a Canadian* (Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1947); index files in Ventnor Heritage Museum