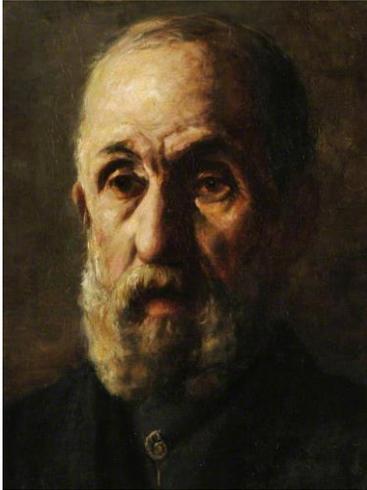




**Mark Norman - Geologist, Diarist, Politician, Fishmonger, Parent . . .**



Mark William Norman was one of Ventnor's most remarkable residents. Completely self-educated, he taught himself geology and wrote *A Popular Geology of the Isle of Wight*, still in print today. He established a museum in Ventnor, kept a fishmongers' shop, married and raised seven children, and kept diaries in which he looked back over his life. His diaries are now in the Society Collection, and the quotations here are taken from them.

He was born in London, but when he was twelve he was sent by his father (his mother having died) to walk alone from London to his grandparents on the Isle of Wight. He described the journey in detail, and how when he finally found his grandparents' house in Langbridge in Newchurch, and knocked on the door : *It was opened by a stout old lady, This was my grandmother. She stood looking at a little urchin, in scant costume and worn out shoes, asking "who be ee?" and "where do ee come from?" When I replied she burst into tears.*

He remained on the Island, doing various casual jobs, and in his late 20s settled in Ventnor, selling crabs and lobsters around the town. In 1837, when Ventnor was little more than a hamlet, he set up a fish stall . . . *close to the high road in front of some old cottages above on the rising ground . . . my future child wife [Mary Ann Day] lived close by with her mother and used to attend my stall for me when I was away purchasing my stock or taking crabs and lobsters to the houses of the visitors. A first rate little saleswoman she made.* Mark Norman and Mary Ann Day were married in 1844 when she was just 16, and he was twice her age. This caused some raised eyebrows, but theirs was a good marriage - he later commented that: *Like most unfashionable marriages it was the most important event in our lives.* They moved into a small house on the High Street (roughly where Knights Court now stands) taking out the wall facing the street to make an open fronted fish shop, which flourished, though Norman complained that it was an uphill fight, saying: *As the place [Ventnor] increased we got on better. But still we met with scanty support from the resident gentry who dealt with Ryde or elsewhere.*

By 1851 Mark and Mary Ann had four children: Emma (5), Marian (3), William (2) and a baby Maria. But in 1852 three of the children died of Scarlet Fever - only Marian surviving. Their father was bitter about the death of the children; he felt that the doctor's advice not to move the sick children had been given more to prevent the spread of the disease among wealthy visitors than for the welfare of the children. A small headstone can still be seen in the corner of the Central Car park, which is where the old Congregational Church once stood; the stone just gives the initials of the three children and the date 1852. (A second tragedy hit the family nearly a hundred years after the first, when Mark's granddaughter Hilda and her mother Florence were killed by enemy action during a bombing raid on Ventnor in 1943.)

Mark and Mary Ann had six more children, and moved to 27 Ventnor High Street, where eldest son Frank joined the business, taking over when his father died. The shop was still a fish shop (MacFisheries) in the 1930s.

During his long life, as well as pursuing his interest in geology, Mark was active in local politics, and a member of Ventnor Town Board. He died in 1899 aged 87; Mary Ann died in 1902.

Lesley Telford, *Ventnor and District Local History Society*. Information from Society records and the diaries of Mark Norman. For more information about Mark Norman see *Old Men Remember*, published by the Society. The painting of Mark Norman shown here is by Charles J Ryan, and is held by the Isle of Wight Council Heritage Service

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