



VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

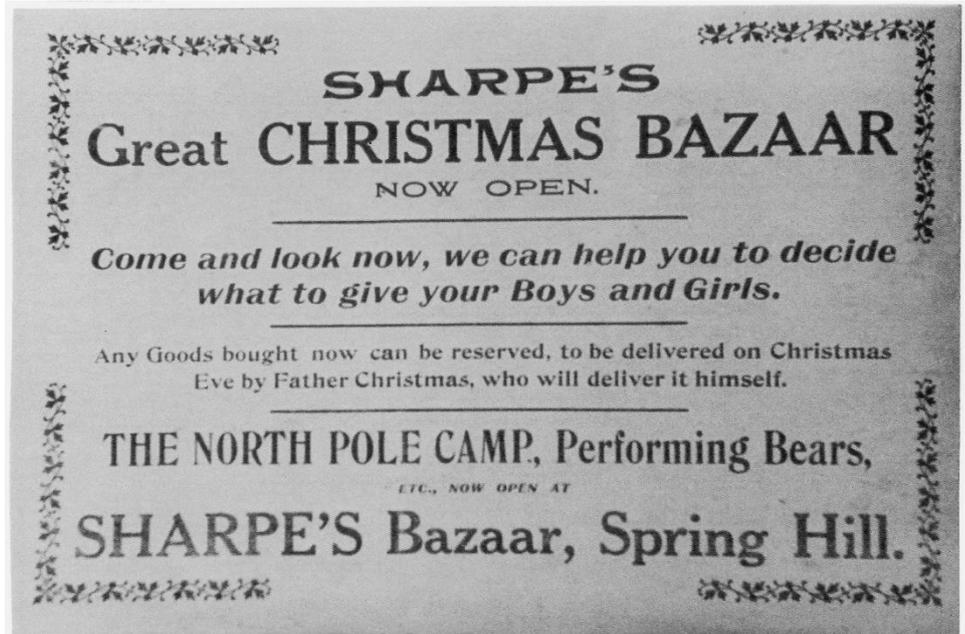
Sharpe's Christmas Bazaar – December 1909



Hamley's great toy store on London's Regent Street was long famous for its Christmas toy selection and its displays. I often recall my dad's accounts of the times when he and his older sisters were taken up to Hamley's in the 1930s, returning with Hornby trains, sets of Britain's farm animals and farm buildings, and board games. In the Edwardian era, Sharpe's store in Spring Hill seems to have had almost as impressive a range of toys and displays. One gentleman, having just come down from London, remarked upon seeing Sharpe's Christmas Bazaar in 1909, that he had not see its equal in the capital city.

The local newspaper, the Mercury, thought it eclipsed all previous records for variety and ingenuity. The windows had everything for young and old. There were clockwork railway trains running on innumerable lines, some travelling at express speed, others moving much more slowly at the will of the driver. A few engines were propelled by steam and there was one that was fitted with brakes, reversing gear and a regulator.

To complete the scene, there were even railways stations with waiting passengers, signal boxes and signals – all a perfect model of representation, so the newspaper remarked. A very different model was that representing an electric plant. Here one could see a steam generator driving a four-volt dynamo, powerful enough to produce a brilliant light or to drive another electric toy.



However, the real star of the show, seems to have been the 'animated picture machine' that was placed just inside the store doorway. By putting a penny in the slot and turning a handle, an electric light appeared and one then observed through the viewer a series of moving pictures. The best 'movie' was apparently that showing the 'North Pole Camp'. Frozen snow is seen everywhere and the sun is setting on the horizon. Lumps of ice are being melted in a can over a fire. A polar bear, looking quite majestic, is seen emerging slowly from a cave. There appear to be tinned foods in abundance, including Rowntree's cocoa, potted meats and preserves.

The store's toy selection was described as abundant, with something for all ages and for girls as well as boys. As the advert states, any toys selected by parents for their offspring could be delivered on Christmas Eve by Sharpe's very own Father Christmas, the role typically taken by Mr. Alfred James Sharpe, the store owner. However, one has to remind oneself that, for many of the children of Ventnor's poorer families, such gifts could be no more than wild flights of fancy. At best, they would get an old stocking, with an orange and a penny chocolate bar, or perhaps a home-made toy fashioned from an old piece of wood. Sharpe's Bazaar was no place for them, although they might peer enthralingly at the window displays.

Michael Freeman, *Ventnor & District Local History Society*; drawn from the index files of Fay Brown in the Heritage Centre

