



Miss Margaret Catherine Dick, once of Madeira Hall, Bonchurch

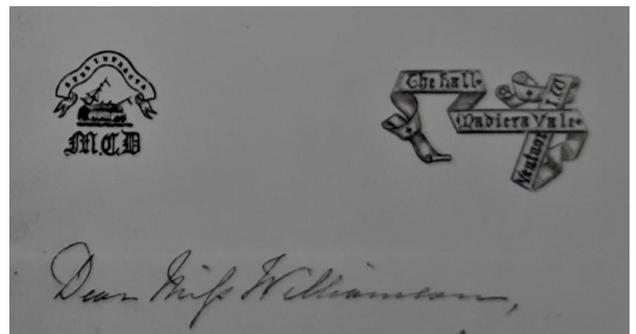


Dr. James Mann Williamson was a doctor who came to the Royal National Hospital in 1868 and later set up practice in Ventnor in 1876, probably attracted by the wealthy and fashionable clientèle that formed a large part of the town's visitor population. Among papers inherited by his son, Dr. James Bruce Williamson and, later, passed on to his practice partner, Dr. Alan Champion, there is included this photo of Miss Margaret Catherine Dick, taken by well-known local photographer, William Nicholson. Nicholson initially set up in business sometime in the mid-1860s, based in Devonshire (later renamed Dudley) Road. Ten or so years on, he had established *The Undercliff Studio* at 20 Mill Street (now Pier Street). We have no date for the photo of Margaret Dick, but a fair guess is that it is about 1870 when she would have been just over 40 years old. The photo probably came into the Williamson family's possession because Dr. James Mann Williamson's sister Ellen struck up a friendship with a niece of Margaret Dick.

James Mann Williamson himself attended upon Margaret Dick, probably up to her death in March 1879. Among his papers is a copy prescription which lists as follows: 2 ozs Eau de Cologne; 2 drachms Tincture of Cantharides; 5 drops of Oil of Lavender or Oil of Rosemary; and Erasmus Wilson's Lotion for administration night and morning. The last-named item was generally used to promote hair growth, while Oil of Lavender helped to treat a range of conditions, including anxiety, depression, fungal infection, allergy, eczema and nausea. Cantharidin was a poison if ingested

but was often used topically for the treatment of warts. As was typical of so much pharmaceutical practice of the time, the efficacy or otherwise of these 'drugs' was poorly understood. James Mann Williamson related to his son James Bruce, that Margaret Dick lived in one room at Madeira Hall and had her meals brought to her through a 'trap-door', probably a dumb waiter. He had observed this when attending her. However, he also remarked how she was nocturnal, going out on walks in Bonchurch and Madeira Vale in the early hours of the morning. Among the Williamson papers, there is also a letter penned by Margaret Dick to Ellen Williamson, dated 21st May 1878 (see adjacent letterhead), to thank her for 'the photo of Mrs Langtry!' This was plainly Lily Langtry, the Victorian socialite, then much talked of in fashionable circles. The letter went on to thank Ellen for the pleasure of seeing her.

Some readers will be aware that Margaret Dick has often been thought of as the real-life model for Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's novel, *Great Expectations*, serialised over 1860-61. A Bonchurch resident of more than one hundred years ago, Mrs. S. Kingswell, recollected late in life that her father's youngest sister was once a companion/nurse to Miss Dick and that the lady had taken to her bed after her father had withheld consent for her to marry a naval lieutenant. The particular pose of the photograph lends some confirmation to this account. However, not all of the information recounted above conforms to Dickens's famous character, and it is likely that Miss Havisham represents a compound of people and situations with which he became acquainted, or gained knowledge about, at different points in his life.



Ventnor & District Local History Society: Sharon Champion and Michael Freeman, the photo from the Alan and Sharon Champion Private Collection. The Kingswell account appeared in the local *Mercury* in 1965.



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