



VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



NOAH'S ARK - 'The first lifeboat'



Many older residents, especially those who regularly used Ventnor Railway Station in Mitchell Avenue before it closed in 1966, will remember this model of Noah's Ark in the booking hall. In the early 1950s, I travelled to East Cowes to school every day by train, and I clearly remember it being on the left as you entered the booking hall, adjacent to the entrance to the platform. It was constructed in 1933 by Mr M E Twyman of Freshwater and Mr J Needham from Totland Bay and was used as a focal point for charity collections for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), hence the apt caption at the top of the display.

The exact date on which it was removed from the station is not known, but after the line from Shanklin to Ventnor was permanently closed in April 1966 - just three months short of its centenary, many theories were put forward as to where it had gone: It was first reported in the local Ventnor paper at the time (the *Isle of Wight Mercury*), dated July 1966, that Cowes Ladies Lifeboat Guild had taken it over. This would seem reasonable as the theme of the collection for the RNLI would have been perpetuated.

Twenty two years later, in 1988, another report in the *Mercury* stated that the 'Ark' had been seen by Mrs Ros. Young of Ventnor, at the Southern Railwaymen's Home for Children, nearby Woking Station in Surrey. This, again, is also a plausible place for it to be, as the 'Ark' was always assumed to be railway property, but whether it was still being used as an RNLI charity collection display is unknown. The following year, in June 1989, the *Mercury* reported that the Ventnor & District Local History Society had made an appeal for information about the whereabouts of the 'Ark' after contacting the RNLI and the Railway authorities to no avail.

Finally, in December 1996, the *Steam Railway Magazine* published the following article – '*For many years the booking hall of Ventnor Station had a superb model of Noah's Ark, complete with toy animals. This exhibit collected money for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. The display was taken away when the station closed in 1966 and went to a tourist attraction in Godshill around 1970. It was reported to have been at Woking and in the Bristol area, but these sightings were never confirmed.*'

The mystery of the 'Ark' remains to this day (especially as the photograph shows it with a 'rural' background, not in situ at the station). Wouldn't it be nice if someone, after reading this article, came forward with some definitive information about what happened to it and where it is now. If it was found, we would love to have it in our museum in Spring Hill, but it would probably be more suited for display at the Isle of Wight Steam Railway at Havenstreet.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: **Colin Beavis** Ventnor & District Local History Society. Photograph from the Society's Archives



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

www.ventnorheritage.org.uk / telephone 855407

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