

## 'The Swamp' - one of Ventnor's stranger localities



The picture shows the buildings on the east side of Victoria Street in the 1870s. The tall one just right of centre is the Monte Bello lodging house, with its attractive first floor balcony. As is apparent, there are no buildings on the west side of Victoria Street, the ground sloping steeply away to the west to a large area of land that, for many years, was known locally as 'The Swamp', and today is mostly just a car park. It was in the 1880s that it gained notoriety as a wet and muddy place and a disgrace to the town's sanitary provisions. By that time, a slaughterhouse had been erected there, along with a collection of rather mean cottages, but there was no paving or proper drainage, the latter made worse by local builders using the area as a dump for rubble such as to form an impermeable conglomerate. In the midst of it all, moreover, was a town pump. Around the swamp, on the upward sloping ground, there was rank grass and brambles and a few stumpy trees. Here the local children made for themselves a wild playground, well clear of the muddy bottom.

As Ventnor's Local Board huffed and puffed their disapproval, one elderly inhabitant, Henry Hadfield, remarked that, fifty years before, the area had been a green meadow, dotted with bush and briar and incorporating a spring of pure water. Once it was never a swamp, in other words. When Monte Bello was erected in the 1840s, visitors on its balcony would have looked across something of a bucolic landscape.

The later 1880s saw the west side of Victoria Street being developed with shops and chapels, while on the Albert Street boundary a long housing terrace soon appeared. In 1910, the Council at last acted to level, pave, metal, kerb and light the track through 'The Swamp' to form a continuation of Pound Lane. However, the 'wasteland' epithet still retained some currency through the inter-war years, a feature rather confirmed when the military started night exercises in the area in 1942, using blank ammunition. When each exercise was over, the local kids scrambled out of their beds to hunt for metallic souvenirs.

Ventnor residents with long memories may recall that all kinds of plans have been put forward for 'the Swamp' over the post-war decades. Billy Nigh once wanted a memorial sports ground there. An Island-based development company planned for a new supermarket, a new medical centre and a new library. None came to fruition at the time, though new medical centres did subsequently materialise in different locations, and Tesco, of course, opened up on the middle of the High Street.

In the end, perhaps one just has to savour the historical prospect of the green meadow that Hadfield so vividly recalled.

Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre