

Laura Hortense Richards

On another of my visits to Ventnor cemetery, I came across this impressive grave dedicated to Laura Richards, wife of John Morgan Richards, the owner of Steephill Castle from 1903 to 1918.

John Morgan Richards was an American businessman who made his fortune from the promotion of patent medicines (the most well-known being '*Carters Little Liver Pills*'). He also had the dubious distinction of introducing cigarette smoking to Britain in 1877, with '*Richmond Gem Cigarettes*' imported from America.

He was born in New York on February 16th 1841, the son of Dr. James Richards, a presbyterian minister of English descent, and Elizabeth Beals. He grew up in Boston where he met Laura Hortense Arnold. They were married in 1863 and moved permanently to London in 1867 and set up home in Lancaster Gate, maintaining their American citizenships for the rest of their lives. Among his many attributes he became chairman of the American Society in London and was also a member of the Reform Club.

From his first visit to the Island in 1872, John Morgan Richards was captivated by Ventnor, later writing; '*We never felt elsewhere the charm and delight that captured our fancy and revealed to us our ideals of Country and Seaside life that instantly claimed our delighted souls and held them captive to this very day*'.

They would spend long stretches of the summer months, usually with a large entourage, staying in Ventnor at various locations and eventually moving permanently into Steephill Castle in 1908. John Morgan Richards spent the rest of his life at the Castle until his death in 1918.

His wife was rather eccentric and became one of Ventnor's most colourful characters, considering herself an '*emissary of God*'. She would send curt telegrams to world leaders directing them in their affairs of state, often adding weird postscripts, such as; '*aren't the daffodil lovely for this time of the year?*' or '*have faith in onions!*' She died in August 1914 and is buried in Ventnor cemetery. Her husband of over 50 years called her '*Laurie*' and the headstone is engraved to '*My Laurie*'.

In 1906, a tragedy befell the Richards's when their eldest daughter, Pearl, died. On Sunday, August 12th, she had spent some time with her parents at Steephill and, before travelling back to London, she attended mass at St. Wilfrid's Roman Catholic Church in Ventnor. She then travelled back to her London home where she died peacefully in her sleep that night.

Pearl Mary Teresa Richards was a well-known novelist, dramatist and playwright (who wrote under the pseudonym of John Oliver Hobbes). She had married Reginald Walpole Craigie, and although London remained their home, in 1900 they leased a large house called St.Lawrence Lodge, just along the road from the Castle. It was later re-named Cragie Lodge and retains that name to this day.

Postscript: Steephill Castle was a folly, built in 1835 by John Hambrough, who was one of Ventnor's greatest benefactors and was responsible for funding many buildings, possibly the most famous being St Catherine's Church which cost him £4,655!

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Colin Beavis Ventnor & District Local History Society - photograph from author's collection.



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