



## International Stores in Ventnor



International Stores had a presence in Ventnor for almost one hundred years, opening first at 58, High Street in 1889 (next to the Commercial Hotel) and closing in 1986, by which time the grocery business was based at 5, High Street, next to the current branch of Boots. Over the intervening years, it had been located at 69/71 High Street and at 22 High Street. The image shows one of the grocer's motor-vans at an unidentified location in the town around 1920. The vehicle appears to be a model-T Ford and the registration plate looks to be a London one. The vehicle may have been used to bring supplies from a London warehouse. However, it may also have also been used for local deliveries, although groceries for such customers were more typically sent out with errand boys. There is no record of the identities of the two men.

In the 1930s, the retail chain laid claim to being 'The Greatest Grocer in the World' and its signage certainly became a very familiar sight on British high streets. It was where you bought bacon, ham, poultry, cheese and fine fruits, along with a host of dry goods like tea, coffee and biscuits. Jean Cooper recalled, in a Maple Society Newsletter of the 1980s, being sent shopping in the Ventnor store, together with her sister, when she was a small girl during the 1920s. In those days, there was no such thing as pre-packed foodstuffs. Most goods were weighed and packaged by the counter assistant. So dry goods like sugar or rice, or currants and sultanas, were measured out and placed in stiff little blue bags, their tops very neatly folded so that none of the contents came out in shopping baskets. Bacon, ham, cheese and butter stood on large marble slabs, the butter being cut off and shaped using wooden 'pats', some of which had designs on them. The butter would then be wrapped in greaseproof paper. Jean recalled the wonderful aroma of coffee beans when they were being ground for customers: it was a smell that readily came back to her sixty years on. As a special treat, Jean and her sister were allowed a penny to spend at the store. Her sister bought aniseed balls and a strip of liquorice or a small toffee bar. Jean bought a 'pennyworth' of broken biscuits, for biscuits were sold loose from large glass jars and there was always wastage. Ultimately, the two girls went shares with their spoils, so they ended up with quite a variety.

Sixty years on, Jean was left to reflect on the seemingly slower pace of life that accompanied such shopping expeditions. It was an age when retailing was a service, although one inevitably pauses to wonder how many outlets like International Stores would have passed modern hygiene standards.

*Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre.*



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