

The theme of Open Heritage Day this year is *Amazing Women*, and throughout September the Ventnor Heritage Museum has two new exhibitions - one on Elizabeth Thompson, famous in nineteenth century as a 'Battle Artist' and the other on Olivia Parkes, better known in Ventnor as 'Britannia'. Olivia Parkes is a constant source of fascination to visitors and local people alike, and she was the subject of one of our recent articles: *A Ventnor character: Miss Olivia Parkes* (March 2018). But Elizabeth Thompson is scarcely known now, although she was living in Ventnor with her family in 1874 when she became one of the most famous women in England: her battle painting 'The Roll Call' was exhibited at the Royal Academy and became a national sensation. Public tastes have changed but her paintings are still held in Art Galleries and private collections around the world.

Elizabeth was the daughter of Christiana Weller, a talented pianist, and Thomas James Thompson, who had inherited a fortune from his Grandfather, a slave owner with estates in Jamaica. The family travelled extensively in Europe, Elizabeth and her sister Alice being educated by their father, who encouraged their interest in a wide range of subjects; Elizabeth wrote in her autobiography: *having no boys to bring up, he tried to put all the tuition suitable to both boys and girls in to us*. Elizabeth was to become famous as a Battle Artist, better known as Lady Butler, while Alice became a writer, known to us now as the poet Alice Meynell.

In the early 1860s the family lived in The Dell in Bonchurch, but gave the house up when Elizabeth started to study painting first in the South Kensington School of Art, and then in Florence.



The family returned to Ventnor in the early 1870s; it is not clear where they lived, although Elizabeth described working in her studio under St Boniface Down, using local people as models for her sketches and paintings. She painted religious subjects, and created an altarpiece for St Wilfrid's Church, but became increasingly interested in military subjects, and the buyer of one of her sketches of soldiers in camp at Parkhurst commissioned a large canvas from her on the subject of the Crimean War. The painting, portraying a battalion of Grenadier Guards exhausted and wounded in the aftermath of a battle, was shown in the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1874.

Before the exhibition opened, Elizabeth wrote: *While at home at Ventnor I received extraordinary rumours of the stir the picture was making in London. How it was "the talk of the clubs" and spoken of as "the coming picture of the year". Ventnor society rejoiced most kindly. 'The Roll Call' was so popular that a policeman had to be stationed in front of it to hold back the crowds, and William Holman Hunt said: It touched the nation's heart as few pictures have ever done. It was finally bought by Queen Victoria and remains in the Royal Collection.*

The photograph here dates from that time and may be the one Elizabeth mentioned in her autobiography, saying: *Of course, the photographers began bothering. Nowadays one is snapshotted whether one likes it or not, but it wasn't so bad in those days ; one's own consent was asked, at any rate. I refused. However, it had to come to that at last and my grandfather simply walked into the shop of the first people that had asked me, in Regent Street, and calmly made the appointment. I was so cross on being dragged there that the result was as I expected a rather harassed and coerced young woman, and the worst of it was that this particular photograph was the one most widely published. Indeed, one of my Aunts, passing along a street in Chelsea, was astonished to see her rueful niece on a costermonger's barrow amongst some bananas!*

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