



The Ventnor Observation Tower

I am imagining if you please, Ventnorians wakening some fine morning to behold an Observation Tower - a magnificent stone structure, grand, stately and imposing, 200 feet height and 330 feet above sea level.

Ventnor has its share of eccentric buildings and follies, but this week we look at one that was never built. The words above are those of John Morgan Richards, who was living in Steephill Castle in 1904 when he commissioned drawings from an architect and an engineer for an 'Observation Tower' which he wanted to build on the upper level of Ventnor Park, overlooking the sea. He felt that the park was underused, and had a vision of: *very substantial groups of people day after day landing from the steamers at the pier and from both railway stations, making their way to the tall tower, plenty of the townspeople, residents and visitors, moving forward in the same direction, all looking gratified, eager and alert to 'observe.'*

Interestingly, his thoughts about visitors are echoed in some of our current thinking about tourism. He wanted to attract a different group of people to the town, over and above those coming on day trips by steamer or taking their annual fortnight's holiday by the sea, walking up and down the pier and enjoying the beach and the concert parties: *Something has to be done to interest visitors to make their home here for longer periods, those who will desire to return again and again and persuade others to come, and to whom the above mentioned mild diversions do not strongly appeal.*

The tower was to have passenger lifts to the upper levels, and there would be two intermediate balconies where people could step out to look at the view, before continuing by staircase to the top balcony, with its dome, telescope and powerful binoculars for people to use to study distant views of the land and sea. He saw the lower stories of the tower as providing the attractions of a club: *The base of the tower would be so constructed as to supply accommodation for further very essential and much-needed accessories - public rooms, warm, well ventilated and cheerful, fitted up as reading rooms, well supplied with periodicals and newspapers, the pleasure of a lounge where acquaintances might meet and exchange remarks on the topics of the day.*

And in a final flight of fancy Morgan Richards muses: *There could also be a shooting gallery, bowling alley, perhaps room for light refreshments, a photograph gallery, a small hall for cinema show, public telephone, perhaps wireless telegraphy apparatus for Marconi-grams etc. . . . it goes without saying that a superior band should be provided and play regularly every morning and afternoon at fixed hours.*

Clearly he would have needed to come to some arrangement with the Council for this, but he didn't see this as a problem. If anyone should ask why the town might want to provide a private investor with a site for this, his answer would be: *Terms to be arranged.* Though what those terms might have been is not clear. In any event, the Observation Tower came to nothing. Arthur Cleverly, commenting some fifty years later on contemporary proposals for the town, said wryly: *with all the talk of developments and projects to attract more tourists to Ventnor, I am reminded that there have always been such suggestions. . . . [including this] monstrosity that was to have been built in Ventnor Park. I imagine that the ratepayers were rather glad that this was one 'that did not get off the ground'.*

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#). Quotations here from John Morgan Richards and the illustration are from his book *Almost Fairyland*; additional material from the Fay Brown's local history index.



