

A Bull family photo



This picture comes from one of the late Fay Brown's photograph albums, now part of the Heritage Centre's archive. The label on it states merely that it is the Bull family, with no names for the individuals in the group. I am sure that most of us, when encountering bundles of old family photos, have been disappointed to discover little in the way of identification, and sometimes nothing at all. So as with this Bull family photograph, it is necessary to engage in some kind of detective work to make progress. For Ventnor residents, of course, the location is the easy one: the little rustic bridge that was built across the bottom of the Cascade after Edgar Harvey had turned the old 'cabbage patch' on the site into ornamental gardens in the early 1900s. The viaduct walkway is high up and slightly to the rear of the heads in the photo. Today, there is still a small pond roughly where the family stands, but the onward extension of the water gardens southward is now all concrete. Happily, the remainder of the Cascade gardens to the north remain largely unaltered.

We can date the photo from the clothing styles. It is likely somewhere between 1910 and 1914, and this is confirmed in the relative maturity of some of the visible plantings. That then leaves the identity of the people in the picture. Standing centre is a Royal Navy sailor, with leading seaman insignia and 13 years of service. It is a fair guess that the three youngsters might be his children and that the adult women to left and right might be wife and mother. Poring over some of Fay Brown's index files, as well as the Censuses, I have tentatively concluded that the sailor is Thomas Bull whose family lived at 23 North Street. He was the second son of Thomas and Agnes Bull and listed in the 1901 Census as aged 20 and a sailor by occupation. He then had nine other siblings (five brothers and four sisters), ranged in age from 21 to 2. In 1913, Thomas Bull emigrated to Australia in 1913 aboard HMAS Australia, a battle cruiser. One assumes that his family soon followed behind, for, according to the *Isle of Wight Mercury* of 4th February 1938, his three sons also joined the Royal Australian Navy and, on their father's death in Australia earlier that year, his ashes were buried at sea from aboard the same battle cruiser, with his widow, daughter and three sons present at the ceremony.

Thomas and Agnes Bull's family proved to be every inch a 'service' one, for four of the five sons were in the Royal Navy, the remaining one was in the Army, while one sister was a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) and another drove a crane in a munitions workshop. Returning to the photo again, one is drawn to conclude that it was taken at roughly the time Thomas Bull was about to leave for Australia.

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