



Lodging in Ventnor in the 1870s: A Poisoner and A Pianist

Author H de Vere Stacpoole wrote that many visitors to Ventnor in the 1860s and 70s stayed not in hotels or boarding houses, but in 'lodgings' - accommodation providing bedrooms and a sitting room, along with a landlady to look after the housework and cooking. The photograph here from the 1860s shows the Esplanade Hotel and the Pier Inn (now the Mill Bay) on the right of the picture, while several of the villas at the other end of the Esplanade were 'lodging houses', as were the two large buildings visible above them in Bath Road: Sydney Lodge on the corner and, behind it, Tweed Mount (now called Cleeve Hyrst).



The lodging houses on Bath Road had wonderful sea views and were popular with Ventnor's visitors, many of whom came from abroad. Two of these visitors, famous in very different ways, were an American medical student, George Lamson (1852-1882) and a German pianist and conductor Hans Von Bülow (1830-1894). The first of our visitors, George Lamson, was 19 in May 1871 when he stayed in Sydney Lodge with his parents. The family were from America, and Mrs Lamson's father Robert Schuyler had been known as 'America's First Railroad King', before he was embroiled in a huge financial fraud in 1854, fleeing to Canada and then to France, where he died, his death reportedly caused by 'grief and mortification' - something his grandson George was to cause a great deal more of.



Above: George Lamson
Below: Hans Von Bulow



George qualified as a doctor in America before returning to Europe, seeking adventure working as a surgeon in the Balkan wars of 1876 and 1877. His family had become frequent visitors to the Isle of Wight, living in Mount Vernon on St Boniface Road for a time; George married Kate John in Ventnor on 16 October 1878, and their daughter Agnes was christened here a year later. But George Lamson's life was beginning to fall apart. His medical career was foundering, he was addicted to heroin, possibly as a result of his Balkan adventures, and was desperate for money. Although his wife Kate was an orphan, her wealthy parents had left money in trust to be shared between Kate, her sister and brothers, and since this was before the Married Woman's Property Act came into force, any money Kate inherited would be controlled by her husband. In 1882 Lamson was arrested, accused of using the poison Aconite to murder his brother-in-law, 18 year old Percy John, in order to ensure that some of the boy's share of the family money came to Kate. After a sensational trial Lamson was found guilty and sentenced to death. It was a huge story in Ventnor - the poison he used had been bought from High Street Chemist Charles Smith, who along others from the town, had given evidence at the Old Bailey.

Our second visitor, musician Hans Von Bülow, was famous for his talents rather than crimes. Arriving in Ventnor in July 1875, he stayed in Tweed Mount for three months while preparing for a concert tour of America where he would premiere Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No 1, which the composer had dedicated to him. Born in Dresden in 1830, he was admired as a conductor as well as a pianist, but was a short tempered and acerbic man, frequently quarrelling with colleagues, and not easy to work or live with: although his marriage to Franz Liszt's daughter Cosima ended when she fell in love with Richard Wagner, he only granted her a divorce years later, and never spoke to Wagner again.

Von Bülow was one of the greatest piano virtuosos of his time, and his stay in Tweed Mount was apparently made more pleasurable for him by the arrival of a fine Chickering Grand Piano, a gift sent from America. The Chickering Grand Piano was a huge, black, heavily carved beast; apparently only six of which were ever sold. It must have been a mighty business manoeuvring it up or down Bath Road!

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#). Sources: Society Collection; *The Trial of George Lamson* Ed Adam H L (1913); *Victorian Murders* Jan Bondeson (2017). With thanks to Paul Mossman and Olga Bobrovnikova for information on Von Bülow.