



## The Sewell Family 1: Elizabeth Missing Sewell

William Sewell born 1721 in Cumberland, was educated at Oxford, where he studied Hebrew and Mathematics. In 1765 he became the Rector of Headley in Hampshire, midway between the Devil's Punch Bowl and Chawton, home of Jane Austen. His wife, Frances Clarke, was from a wealthy and influential Isle of Wight family, and their son Thomas became a solicitor living and working in Newport.



Thomas and his wife Jane raised nine children: five boys, followed by four girls. The boys were formally educated, making highly successful careers in the church, law and politics: William became a cleric like his father, and founded Radley School/College; Henry became the first Prime Minister of New Zealand; Richard became an influential Australian lawyer; Robert a solicitor like his father, and James was the Warden of New College Oxford for more than 40 years. But there was no expectation that daughters needed an education or would have to earn a living. Ellen, Elizabeth, Emma and Janetta had a very bleak schooling, never married, and spent their lives caring for their extended family. This makes it more extraordinary that it is one of those daughters, Elizabeth Missing Sewell, (born in 1815 and named after her Godmother, Mrs Missing), whose achievements are best known in Ventnor.

Thomas Sewell was not good with money, and when he died in 1842, he left enormous debts, which his children vowed to pay off rather than declare bankruptcy. The family house in Newport was sold, and his widow and their daughters moved to smaller home, and then, in about 1844, to 'Seaview' in Bonchurch, later renamed 'Ashcliff'. By this time Elizabeth and her sisters had taken responsibility for raising six young nieces and nephews following the death of their brother Henry's wife. When brother Robert's wife died five years later there were three more children to be cared for in the Bonchurch house.

Family finances were being pooled, in order to pay off their father's debts, and Elizabeth had started writing educational and religious books, typical of their time, but very popular. It occurred to Elizabeth that she and two of her sisters could take in additional girls as boarders, teaching them alongside their nieces; a school was established which became widely respected, far beyond the Island – when the wealthy American Chandler family sent their three children to England to be educated, the sons were sent to Rugby and Eton, and the daughter to Miss Sewell's school in Bonchurch. The education provided there was based on Anglican Christianity, but was relaxed and liberal, advanced for the time, with the girls encouraged to read, discuss and take exercise as well as learning the usual accomplishments of music and languages. It was a natural continuation of the days when they were teaching their own nieces, and the girls called their teachers 'Aunts'.

Elizabeth Missing Sewell was a tiny woman, who one of her pupils described as reminding her of a more amiable Queen Victoria (Elizabeth herself says wryly in her autobiography that when they were children her brothers referred to her as 'Blighted Betty' because of her size). Her success as an author brought her into contact with well-known writers such as Wordsworth and Tennyson. But she didn't relish fame or enjoy these meetings, describing a visit from a well-respected Victorian author: *Miss Sara Austin called upon me one day . . . She awed me greatly as she led the conversation, whilst I only said what was absolutely necessary in reply; and when she took leave of me I felt as if I had been reading in the Quarterly Review, and rushed away to my early dinner, and the society of my sisters, with intense relief.*

Perhaps because of her own miserable schooling, Elizabeth was convinced of the need for schools employing well trained female teachers to educate ordinary middle class girls. In 1866 she founded the St Boniface School for Girls in Mitchell Avenue, raising money to build the imposing building which still stands opposite Hillside. The first blue plaque created by the Ventnor & District Local History Society, was placed there, reading: *This Building was erected as St Boniface Diocesan School by Elizabeth Missing Sewell 1815-1906 of Bonchurch, Authoress and Education Pioneer.*

Towards the end of Elizabeth's life another member of the Sewell family moved to Ventnor. Henry Sewell bought Steephill Castle in 1887. Curiously, Elizabeth makes no mention of this in her autobiography, although must surely have been aware of the family connection - Henry Sewell's grandfather was a cousin of Elizabeth's father.



Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#), using documents and records from our Collection, Elizabeth Sewell's autobiography, available online.