



Ventnor Central - once the Bible Christian Chapel

The Bible Christian Church was founded in the West Country in the early 1800s, and spread to the Isle of Wight ; in Apse Heath, Arreton and other rural areas old chapels can still be seen bearing the name *Bible Christian*. The movement was popular among farm labourers, although perhaps not with the established church:

Samuel Wilberforce, the vicar of Brighstone, is said to have urged that Bible Christians should be sacked from their jobs and turned out from their cottages.

The Bible Christians often used women preachers, and the Isle of Wight became a stronghold largely due to the inspirational teachings of Mary Toms, who was invited by Farmer Drudge to preach at Ventnor in his house in Longdown in 1823. In his old age Mary's husband described her visit to Ventnor thus: *She preached there and a Mr and Mrs Groves who kept the only hotel in Ventnor, Griffin the Miller and Caws who kept the Crab and Lobster were very kind to her. Ventnor then consisted of the Farm, the Crab and Lobster Old Inn, Groves's Hotel, the Mill and the Miller's home.*

In 1843 the Bethesda Chapel was built in St Catherine Street, but the congregation continued to grow and in 1879 the Victoria Street Chapel, designed by Edgar Harvey, who was later to create the Ventnor Cascade, was opened. An impressive building in the Gothic style of architecture with white brick facings mixed with red, it could accommodate 300 people in the ground floor chapel. The basement contained a schoolroom and two 'tenement rooms', sometimes described as an adjoining cottage, as in this description from 1897: *The present chapel is a lofty building, furnished with a good organ. . . The whole pile makes a fine block - chapel, schoolroom underneath, and cottage adjoining.*



In the early 1900s the Bible Christians amalgamated with the Methodists, and this photograph from 1910 shows a Methodist Outing about to set off from outside the chapel, which was clearly a centre of activities organised for children and young people.

The two Methodist chapels in Ventnor united in 1945 both congregations using the High Street church (the building recently used by the Boxing Club). The organ and memorial stones were moved there from the Victoria Street chapel, which was renamed the Victoria Hall, and was used for Sunday School and Youth Group functions: in 1951 the Methodist Sunday School, Senior Youth Group, and the Boys Club were all based there.

When the old building was eventually sold to the IOW County Council it became Ventnor Youth Centre. Managed by Ventnor Town Council, it has been renamed Ventnor Central, and is used for occasional community events while its future is decided. Readers may be interested in the current plans for the redevelopment of the building as social housing and a new home for Ventnor Library - these plans are on display in the library this week.

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