

VENTNOR AND DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

September 2010

Newsletter No. 17

MUSEUM PIECES

The summer has been a disappointment as regards visitors to the Museum, with a significant drop in numbers compared to recent years. This, of course, has a knock-on effect with resulting lower sales of books, DVDs, booklets etc.

As previously reported, repairs to the office roof had become urgent. These were carried out in early summer and appears to be a job well done. However, having stopped the rain coming in through the roof, sewage now comes up through the floor and has been overflowing into the office and the Museum. The drains have had to be professionally cleared on three occasions. Being a public building and a health hazard to staff working in the office, specialists were called in. Video footage revealed a collapsed drain out under the pavement. This, apparently, is our responsibility (there's a surprise!), so yet again a large outlay is forecast. We hope our insurance will cover it.

Thanks to the Rev. Graham Morris, Vicar of Ventnor, for his kind words when officially opening our Exhibition. Screen sponsorship is excellent with 13 out of 14 screens taken up. Thank you all sponsors.

The big event of the summer was the unveiling of one of our blue plaques down on Bonchurch shore to commemorate the actor Sir John Martin Harvey's summer home. The unveiling was performed to a crowd of about 60 people by the well-known film actor, Sir Donald Sinden. The weather was excellent and the occasion will be long remembered.

Roger Silsbury, with me as back marker, undertook two walks in the Whitwell area for the IW Walking Festival, collection for the History Society. About 30 walkers attended each walk, again both taking place in glorious weather.

What a turn around! Seven new stewards on the roster. In fact, enough to open on Monday mornings, the first time for several years. Thanks to all concerned.

Ventnor Council are keen to promote the Winter Gardens and Fay and I have been helping to put together an Exhibition detailing the history of the building from our extensive archives. The Exhibition took place in mid-September.

Graham.

**HAVE YOU VISITED THE 2010 EXHIBITION YET? IT IS OPEN UNTIL OCTOBER 30th.
THE MUSEUM IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE VENTNOR HISTORY SOCIETY.**

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Q is for 'QUEEN MARY HEDGE'

One of the delights of visiting the Undercliff at St. Lawrence used to be to admire the splendid topiary of the 'Queen Mary Hedge.'

The hedge was developed by Mr. John Bertram White, known as 'Brisher.' Topiary must have run in the family as his father created a 'Loch Ness Monster' hedge at 'East Winnowing,' a house down near the Buddle Inn.

The 'Queen Mary Hedge' began in 1937 in the grounds of his home in Old Park Road, and gradually took the shape of the famous Cunard liner. The three funnels, bridge and masts were allowed to grow, but as Mr. White explained in a booklet he prepared in 1949, he grew disillusioned with its slow progress and nearly abandoned the whole idea. Fortunately, he persevered and in due course a landing stage, bollards and a pennant were all created. Being a privet hedge it needed continual cutting. Its final dimensions were 48ft. long, 6ft. wide and 5ft.6ins. high.

In 1940 Mr. White witnessed a bombing raid on a channel convoy off the St. Lawrence coast, and in consequence he decided to use the hedge as a charity collection point, first for the Merchant Navy Comforts Fund and later for the Shipwrecked Fishermen and Mariners' Society. After the war the hedge became a tourist attraction and 'Brisher' erected a triangular tray sheet for coach tourists, who stopped up on the main road, to toss coins into. He also constructed a chute to roll coins all the way down the embankment into a money box.

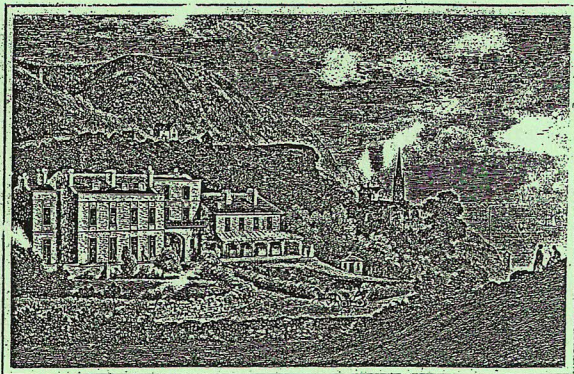
Through newspapers and magazines, the hedge became famous until in 1976 it was badly damaged by lorries working on the water pumping station and it was cut down.

'Brisher' White was born in Niton, served in the 1st World War, was a fast bowler for Ventnor Cricket Club and was for 20 years secretary to the St. Lawrence Billiards and Social Club. He was in charge of the water pumping station equipment for 34 years. He died, aged 75, in December 1973.

The hedge was sited in the garden adjoining 'Queen Mary Cottage' in Old Park Road.

Graham

THE ROYAL HOTEL AND WILLIAM JOHNSON. An interesting piece of research came my way in the last few months concerning William Johnson, who was the great-great-grandfather of the enquirer. I found that in the 1850s William was letting lodgings at Pelham House but by 1870 the Royal Hotel was owned and managed by him. In the 1871 street directory the entry reads: "William Johnson, Royal Hotel and Boarding Establishment. Landau, droskies, and posting in all its branches etc. This hotel is delightfully situated due south, and commands extensive sea views and stands on its ornamental grounds of three acres in Belgrave Road. The advertisement in 1873 declared that the hotel had a "first-class billiard room. A very superior table with the latest improvements." His first wife Mary Ann is buried in St. Catherine's Churchyard but we could not locate the grave. Their son, Horace, was the enquirer's great-grandfather. William's second wife, from Godshill, was also named Mary Ann. William died in January 1882 and the IW Mercury report stated that over 100 attended his funeral at Shanklin, including some fifty members of the Manchester Unity, attending in their black silk scarves and wearing a spray of Cyprus in their coats. Mr. W. Mew Judd, Mr. Elgee, Mr. Hibberd, and Mr. Fletcher Moor were amongst those attending from Ventnor. William was buried in Shanklin Cemetery (Gatten) and with the help of Chris. Warder, Secretary of the Shanklin History Society, when William's great-great-grand-daughter visited in June we were able to find the grave. She was then staying at 'Eversley' but had also stayed at the Royal. After leaving Ventnor, William went to the 'Clarendon' at Shanklin—he was 61 when he died. I find it very rewarding meeting anyone to whom I have sent information. My painstaking research and filing over many years has repaid over and over again and helps so much with Museum and private enquiries. All donations go to the Society's Conservation Fund. (Mr. Jeremiah Elgee was the station-master, an unusual name).



ROYAL HOTEL, VENTNOR, ISLE OF WIGHT.

WILLIAM JOHNSON

RESEARCH This half year I have been spending as much as 12-15 hours a week providing information to enquirers who have come into the Museum or who have somehow got my telephone number or email address. Appreciation make the time spent very rewarding. Topics have included Henry de Vere Stacpoole, Park Lodge, Ventucky Minstrels, the Gasworks, Castle View, Lime Kilns, Roslyn, Clifton Terrace, the Wellington and Balvarran. I often assist students with Ventnor projects, which I really enjoy. One of my grand-daughters recently wrote on the final page of her College project: "My grandmother is a very historical person...." which, perhaps, just about sums me up!!

MUSEUM REVIEW COMMITTEE - Occasionally we take items into the Museum 'on loan' and recently we accepted a large photo of Ventnor Station 1952, framed in wood said to be from Ventnor Pier. We have also purchased a package of 112 documents relating to Sir John Morgan Richards and Steephill Castle. Other acquisitions include a mandolin/banjo used by Bert Spires in the Ventucky Minstrels 1949-54, memorabilia from Holy Trinity Church, a black and white photo of Randall's charabanc 1925, a page from a 1930 Daily Sketch depicting Ventnor Carnival and a copy of the will of William Orchard of 'Marable (Mirables) proved in 1583. Graham's idea of displaying some of the recent acquisitions at each monthly meeting has proved very popular with members.

The **Annual Lunch** will be at the Winter Gardens on November 18th—details shortly from Roger.

October 29th—'Steeped in History, Making History, the Development of the Botanic Gardens'

VENTNOR, ISLE OF WIGHT **THE ENGLISH MEDITERRANEAN**

The Society has recently published this book written by prize-winning author Michael Freeman, who lives and works in Ventnor and is a Society member. It is a blend of conventional guide book and local history, starting from the scene that meets the visitor's eye today and then seeks to unravel the story behind it.

The book is illustrated with a variety of excellent pictures—almost one on each page.—and shows that we do live in an exceedingly beautiful place.

The English Mediterranean is on sale at the Museum for £9.50. It is an exceedingly good read! It would make an excellent Christmas present too.

The frontispiece intrigued me, as I counted how many buildings were pictured which are not in existence today. You will be surprised.

Do buy one please!

OUR SOCIETY

The death of our Vice-Chairman Rob Mew was a big blow to the town and to the Society. We do miss him. Colin Elvers unfortunately suffered a stroke and has been unable to attend recent meetings. We hope he will be able to join us again soon. He is interested to hear about the progress of the Society when he receives visitors. The 2010 membership was 164 + 24 Honorary or Life Members at the time of writing. The subscription increase does not seem to have made a great deal of difference, but several long-term members have not renewed this year unfortunately.

In April, the Rev. Graham Morris showed us how our Parish Church is being rejuvenated. Kate Young took us on 'A Trans-Siberian Odyssey' in May, we learnt about Ryde's Royal Photographers from Roy Brinton in June and Fay showed slides and talked about 120 Years of Ventnor Carnivals in July (assisted by Roger Silsbury, deputising for Colin).