

VENTNOR AND DISTRICT Newsletter No.20

LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY March 2012

OUR HERITAGE MUSEUM IS CELEBRATING ITS SILVER JUBILEE THIS YEAR
thanks to many, many volunteers who have given so much of their time and energy. .
See last page. What better way to open this Newsletter than with Graham's piece:

FROM THE ARCHIVES: T is for THEATRES

Although in early days theatrical performances took place in church halls and the larger hotels, the true theatre was represented by five main venues: The Summer Theatre, Pier Pavilion, Town Hall and the Open-Air Theatre, and later, the Winter Gardens.

The Summer Theatre, or Grand Pavilion, today the Gaiety Amusements on the Esplanade, was built in 1896 and boasted a stage, proscenium, scenery, dressing rooms and seating for about 600. About 1912 it was converted to an early cinema, seating reduced to 500. Impresario Bannister Howard put on many fine shows around 1900 including one containing a piece suggestively entitled "Naughtie Nancy" with the celebrated actress Miss Kitty Loftus. In 1905 it was described 'as a pleasant little structure where many excellent companies perform'. By 1923 there were three different concert parties appearing per week. Powis Pinder and Terry Wood also provided shows

The Open Air Theatre was situated on the Eastern Cliffs. Postcards show audiences reclining in deckchairs admiring the afternoon shows. This was from about 1900 up until the First World War. The 1914 guidebook describes them as "al fresco concerts."

The Pier Pavilion was built at the end of the pier in 1907. Concert parties performed there until the mid 1930s when the shows transferred to the new Winter Gardens. The building cost £980, a maple floor was added the following year. "Burlesques" in 1919 and the well regarded "Colour" Concert Party in 1921 were excellent productions and brought in the crowds. By 1923 there were "first rate concert parties with a change of programme nightly at 8.15." Local bands and minstrel troupes also featured, and confetti battles took place.

The Town Hall was built in 1877. It had a large stage and seating for 600. The Ventnor Philharmonic, Choral and Musical and Dramatic Societies performed regularly and Gilbert and Sullivan operettas were the mainstay of the latter's productions. In 1928 "Il Travatore" was attempted. Later, in the 1950s, the local favourites, the Ventucky Minstrels packed the crowds in. Into the 1950s and 1960s, dramas and comedies by well known playwrights held the stage, presented by repertory companies and local theatre clubs.

The Winter Gardens opened on August 17th 1936, when "Bright Times" performed, and up to the Second World War competed with the other venues. In 1938, "Summer Revellers" were in residence. After the war, shows were soon up and running. In the 1950s it was famed for its Big Band Nights and as a dancing venue. A 1962 advertisement claimed '... it was the entertainment centre for the Island'. The popular "Old Tyme Music Hall" was the summer production in 1969 and 1970. In 1971 it was renamed "Cascadia" but soon reverted to the Winter Gardens. Short lived delights included an ice rink. *Ventnor can be proud of its theatrical history with such an abundance of entertainment. What a different world it was!*

WALKING FESTIVAL IN MAY

There are four walks that will be collecting donations for our Society.

Thursday 10th May. FOUR DOWNS AND A FEW UPS. Start from Blackgang Viewpoint car park at 2.30. 6 miles, 4.5 hours. Roger Silsbury 01983 853621. No need to book.

Saturday 12th May. VENTNOR DOWNS: PREHISTORY TO COLD WAR. Start from Smugglers Haven car park at 10.30. 5.5 miles, 5 hours. Richard Downing. 01983 856210. Booking essential.

Wednesday 16th May. TAKING STEPS TO BONCHURCH. Start from the Central car park, Ventnor at 11.00. 3.5 miles, 2 hours. Graham Bennett 01983 855407. No need to book.

Thursday 17th May. OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD AND HEAVEN IN A DAY. Start from St. Martin's Road car park, Wroxall at 11.00. 6 miles, 4.5 hours. Roger Silsbury 01983 853621. No need to book.

MEMBERSHIP

Subscriptions were due for renewal on January 1st (£7.50 - cheques to Ventnor History Society, please).

At the time of writing we had over 90 paid-up members and 24 Life or Honorary Members. It was with regret that we heard of the death of Peter Bray, one of our most valued members, a great helper with his wife Muriel at earlier Exhibitions and writer of many of our booklets. Graham and Fay represented the Society at the funeral at Cowes.

GIFT AID FORMS

If any members have not signed a Gift Aid Form, please can you do so as the financial reward is of benefit to the Society. Forms are available at meetings or at the Museum.

INTERESTING SPEAKERS

Ending 2011 monthly meetings Richard Smout told us about proposed tunnels under the Solent 1870-1914 and we heard about Island Wildlife from Richard Grogan. The annual luncheon at Leconfield in November was very much enjoyed. In January Sarah Lang told us of the life of Princess Beatrice, and the Isle of Wight Zoo was Karen Dudley's topic in February.

PLEASE HELP

It would be such a great help if some of you readers would just write a little piece for these Newsletters to make them more interesting. I only need short articles - just twice a year. So many of you must have reminiscences you would like to share of Ventnor in the past.

RESEARCH

Queries come to me through the Museum and through emails and telephone calls at home. Over the last six months, they have included the Royal Marine Hotel, C. A. Smith (chemist), Ventnor Mill, Grove Lodge, Orchardleigh (Bonchurch) - now Lake Hotel, the 'Red Chief' - Nash's charabanc and two local clergy—The Revs. R. Ussher and A. P. Clayton. See page 3 for details.

BACK IN 1656 - Did you know that Oliver Cromwell's Commissioners recommended—in 1656—the Union of Ventnor with Bonchurch - but the Restoration prevented it being carried into effect!

WATER CURES?

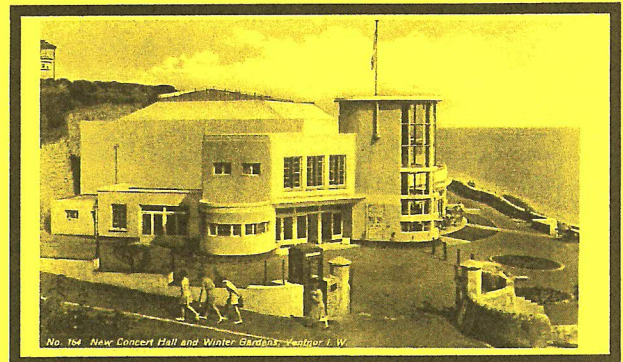
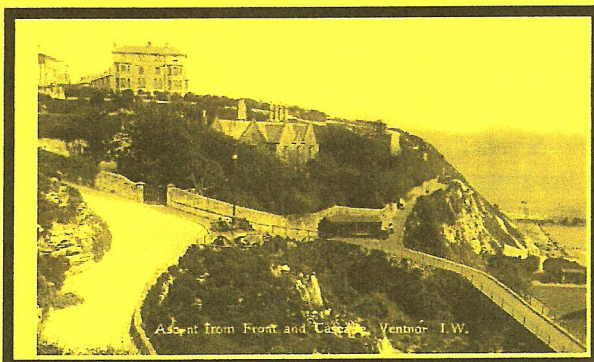
Late in the 17th Century, men who had studied the medical lore of the ancient physicians and were filled with a sudden enthusiasm for salt and water, saw in the ocean a cure for almost all human ills. They were advocates, initially of the internal consumption of the sea, as an alternative to the Spa water which had so long been approved, but the virtues of the sea as a cold bath soon took prior place. The Water-Cure Movement began in Scarborough, one of the old established Spas.

Locally in the 19th Century and early 20th Century hot and cold sea water baths were popular. Around 1858 Jonathan Jolliffe provided sea water baths on Bonchurch Shore. I have a postcard of the building. He lived at Beach Holme. Jolliffe, builders, were responsible for many of the houses in Bonchurch and also opened a house agency and coal department at 5 Mill Street (later Pier Street) in the 1880s. In Jonathan's obituary in 1931, it said that he was one of the few remaining parishioners baptised at the Old Church.

In 1863 'The Baths' was the former name of Undercliff House (now the Spyglass) and on one of my postcards there is a sign on the Royal Hotel gardens wall directing people to "The Baths." At the other end of the Esplanade there were hot and cold sea water baths opposite the Pier. For many years they were run by Thomas Harding (established 1863) who, in 1869 advertised Ladies' Sea Bath @ 8d., 6s. Doz; Children and Servants- single 6d., 5s. Doz.; Gentlemen—single 8d., doz. 6s. Etc. Sponge, Hip and other baths were hired. In the early 1890s Thomas enlarged and improved the premises. He also had bathing machines on the beach. Percy Ford's advertisement in the late 1890s: Hot Sea Bath 1s. 6d., Cold 1s. Bath tickets were 15s. dozen. There were the most up-to-date Cabinet, Turkish, Vapour and Medicated Baths, under medical supervision if required. Hot and cold sea water was delivered to any part of the town. There was a waiting room with tea and coffee, cigars, cigarettes and tobacco; also hot and cold luncheons and teas. Open every day 7 a.m. - 8 p.m. In 1912 Clarence Mannering re-opened the Baths. A sign advertising them can be seen on many old postcards and pictures.

RESEARCH. An interesting research query I have completed recently concerned Lieut. Commdr. Richard Ussher, one of the sons of the **Rev. R. Ussher**, who was Priest in Charge of St. Alban's Church in the mid 1880s to mid 1890s, when he was appointed to Westbury, Wilts. Whilst here he lived at Helvetia, St. Margaret's House and Casa Nostra. My quest was to find the gravestone in Ventnor Cemetery, which I was pleased to do. It is an unusual one, being a plain slab of stone inside a surround, with a large stone cross embedded in it. Richard died in 1922 as result of war service, leaving a widow and young child. He was given a full naval funeral. Two of his brothers – Stephen and Beverley, lost their lives in the War. Coincidentally, at the same time as I was doing this research, our Chairman Janet was investigating Isle of Wight memorials and had obtained the details of their war service, finding out that a memorial is in Whitwell Church. I also had a query about the family of the **Rev. A. P. Clayton**, Vicar of Holy Trinity from 1889-1918. He started the Ventnor Working Men's Club and was one of the three founders of Ventnor Golf Club. (Henry Michell and William Mew Judd were the others). The Rev. Clayton also ran a cricket club for boys at Combe Bottom—he was very keen on sports. The very large family lived at Kilnhurst, St. Boniface Terrace. The name of his son Edward, killed in action, is on the memorial plaque in Holy Trinity Church. Four members of the Clayton family are buried in Ventnor Cemetery.

THE WINTER GARDENS is in the news constantly. The facilities have been missed by so many societies and clubs, and by the general public as a meeting place and a delightful setting for meals. We hope it is not too long before work starts on the building so that it can be brought back into regular use.



Pictures show the Vicarage surrounded by trees and the new Winter Gardens and Concert Hall shortly after it was opened in 1936

MUSEUM PIECES. This time, just a brief report. When you have a building over 100 years old and as large as the Museum, one can expect problems. Following an electrical test, we find we have several defects which need our attention.

Opening on May 12th, our new exhibition called 'Not So Long Ago' looks at changes to Ventnor during the period 1970-2000. To coincide with the Queen's Jubilee, we are remembering 'Royal Connections' down the years, and with the Winter Gardens in the headlines we tell 'The Winter Gardens Story.'

Once again this year we are hoping for screen sponsorship of £30, so if you are able to help out I shall be delighted.

We have a new DVD on sale (not one of ours) entitled 'Ventnor Scrapbook.' This DVD shows Ventnor in the 1930s +, also film of the Island in the 1950s. (£9.95 + postage).

Graham.

MUSEUM CELEBRATES ITS 25th YEAR

This year we are celebrating the opening of our Museum (originally called Ventnor Heritage Centre) which took place in 1987. The actual official opening was in October performed by Lord Mottistone, CBE, Lord Lieutenant of the Island, who congratulated the Ventnor and District Local History Society on carrying out the "imaginative" project within 7 years of its formation. He presented a surprise donation of £1,000 from the TCS Trust to help meet the £10,000 fund-raising target to cover the costs and development of the Museum, which had been created largely by volunteers.

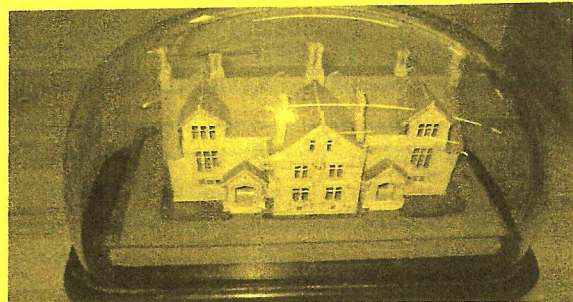
Mrs. D. Ross (Chairman) said it was only 15 months previously that the premises had been purchased. She recalled the origins of the Society, going back to a series of talks given by the Rev. W. Fancutt, their "founding father" and their President. She paid special tribute to Mr. Ernest Biggin, the Society's Secretary and Heritage Centre Curator, —he was the "powerhouse" behind the organisation. Ernest thanked the Town Council, the IW Buildings Preservation Trust and New Horizons and many individuals, hotels and business for their support.

"AMBASSADORS" Ernest appealed to Ventnor people to act as "ambassadors" for the Centre, wherever they went, at home or abroad, and to donate historical items for display. Plans for the future included the development of models of Ventnor's former railway systems. Three volunteers stood out amongst all those who helped with the Centre's creation—Messrs. Stotesbury, T. Witherby and C. Van.

"IT'S NOT BUNK" Mr. Fancutt referred to Ventnor's 400 years of literary history and over 1,000 years of secular history. He declared: "Everywhere you turn, history meets you—and it's not all bunk, despite what Henry Ford said."

RECOLLECTIONS It is interesting to recall that in 1984 the Society were making 'tentative inquiries' to see if part of the derelict former nightclub, the Coconut Grove, could be restored for use as a heritage centre. With many historical exhibits stored at Salisbury Gardens, the Society wished to stage exhibitions but at that time had nowhere permanent to put on such a display.

HAVE YOU VISITED THE MUSEUM? We hope that all the present members have come and had a look round—each annual Exhibition takes a considerable amount of hard work to set up. Please come along and give your support.



Produced for the Ventnor and District Local History Society by Fay Brown