

VENTNOR AND DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Newsletter No. 21

September 2012

FROM THE ARCHIVES.

U is for "UNDERLEY"

As we know, the 'Back of the Wight' was certainly a dangerous place for mariners. But casualties also occurred off the Ventnor coastline as well.

In September 1871, the fully rigged ship "Underley" came ashore between Bonchurch and Dunnose Point. The ship was built in 1866 for the Australian trade. The owner was a Captain Chambers, who traded as the Liverpool and Lancaster line. The vessel was built in Lancaster and was regarded as a ship of fine lines with a tonnage of 1200 tons and carried passengers as well as cargo.

The ship sailed from the Thames bound for Melbourne, but only two days later came to grief at Bonchurch. On the night of 25th/26th September she drove ashore in a south-easterly gale. On board were thirty passengers, the cargo included cotton goods, machinery and gunpowder. The captain was Captain Tidmarsh, but it transpired that a pilot from the Thames was in charge. Why was the ship so close into Bonchurch, which with a south-easterly gale would have made it a lee shore? The Court of Inquiry blamed the pilot for absence of care, and the captain for negligence in leaving his ship in charge of a pilot whose responsibilities ended at Dungeness.

Tugs were sent out from Portsmouth but could not move her, as by now she had broached broadside on to the waves. The Ventnor coastguard stood by with their rocket line. All her passengers and crew were saved, except for a steward, a Mr. Richard Tatton-Groves, who foolishly re-boarded the vessel, it is said to rescue his pet bird, and was washed overboard as the vessel began to break up. The crew were taken to 'East Dene' to recover, the pilot and the captain were accommodated at the Commercial Inn at Ventnor.

This fine vessel became a total loss. For many years its ornately carved name board was to be seen affixed to a barn wall on The Landslip path close to where the wreck took place. We understand the board is now kept safely at a nearby property.

GOOD NEWS

You will find that this edition of the Newsletter has a different format, mainly because of the contributions I have received from members. It has been a great delight as I have been making this request for years. The articles are 'Wartime Recollections' by Jill Wearing, 'Memories of My Boyhood' by David White and 'The Blizzard in March 1952' by Ron Bunnett. So let's have some more for the March issue please!

SILVER JUBILEE

2012 has been the Silver Jubilee of our Heritage Museum – surely a great achievement. Its continuance is due to the dedication of so many volunteers over the years and we are proud that we can still offer such interest by displaying and archiving Ventnor information. Visitors (particularly former residents) thoroughly enjoy coming to see our Exhibitions. It would, however, please us greatly if more local people would take the same opportunity. Members – just remind friends and acquaintances that we are at 11 Spring Hill.

WARTIME RECOLLECTIONS – contributed by Jill Wearing

'Jill, Jill, wake up - the siren's going!' Thus awakened many times during my childhood, we (my Mum, my sister (aged about 3) and I would troop down the long stairs from the flat at 16a Pier Street, outside to the rear store room of Clarks Radio and bicycle shop (not forgetting accumulators - which were always a bit of a mystery to me!) where Dad had been manager, to where our Morrison air raid shelter reposed. We would then settle down until the 'all clear' was sounded by the siren in West Street. The shelter was a metal (almost DIY job) consisting of a sturdy table top of metal with four wire mesh sides bolted together and an opening in one of the mesh panels to allow access. Also in West Street stood the Police Station which was badly bomb-damaged in 1942 and I remember seeing it being pulled down on a warm sunny day in clouds of dust. Dad had been called up in the RAF at the start of the war and spent a good deal of the duration in Egypt where he was principally an aircraft engineer.

But I digress. On occasions we stayed with our grandparents in Albert Street (where the flats are now) and we would use their infinitely grander shelter which was brick-built with a reinforced concrete roof in the back garden. On each side were concrete slabs on which to sit or sleep (!) and I can still recall the dank smell of the interior which just never seemed to go away! The air raids seemed to be most nights, with the enemy bombers trying to take out the radar station upon the Downs - not much chance of beauty sleep! All this went on for a year or two with day and night raids until one direct hit on 'Chickenpit' - (Esplanade Road) which broke our windows in Pier Street. All this was too close for my mother and we moved to Wroxall for the duration where I went to school. Prior to going to Wroxall, I had been at school at 'The Rugen', in Park Avenue, Ventnor, where the head teacher was Miss Groves. We often had lunch in the cellars of Steephill Castle along with some classes. My sister's memories of school were of Albert Street in about 1944, her teacher was Miss Atkins and the heating was by an old Tortoise coke boiler - so you either boiled or froze depending on the supply of coke and where you managed to sit in the classroom. The outside toilets were often unusable in the Winter when they froze!

Carefree days on the beach at Ventnor came to an abrupt end when the enemy bombers used to creep in under the radar beams and strafe the beach with machine gun fire. On one occasion my friend and I were separated from my mother in the confusion and kindly people pushed us under the then wooden set of steps by the Esplanade clock by way of shelter. I was probably about 7 years old at this time. After these raids began, the Esplanade was closed and anti-tank scaffolding was erected along the beach; a section of the pier was taken out (a bosun's chair was used from the shore end if necessary) in case of enemy landing and large concrete blocks

were placed across all the road entrances to the Esplanade (these blocks looked as if they had been cast in very large oil drums). One of the photographs which we had taken on the beach in 1942 has been censored and a landmark like the Pier obliterated. (No digital photography then!)

While living in Wroxall we had a red brick air raid shelter which was built in the garden and I well remember on clear nights towards the end of the war we would sometimes witness what Mum called 'dog fights' of our aircraft fighting off enemy aircraft. As a young child and looking back to these times, we didn't seem to be in touch with the awful reality of the situation - Mum and Nan and Gamps, together with Aunts and Uncles not called up, were there, we were well-fed - largely due to Uncle Les's allotment at Kingates, Niton, and the odd rabbit obtained by our grandfather! He had been a Colour Sergeant at Bisley in his younger days in Princess Beatrice's Rifles which came in handy at times! At the end of the hostilities, I remember us waiting on the platform at Wroxall station to meet my father upon his demobilisation, and how delighted we all were. What a relief it must have been for everybody that the war was over at last (at such a huge cost) and how uplifting it was to be able to pick up where people left off in 1939....though things would never be *quite* the same again.....finally, peace in our time.

A BANK WITHOUT MONEY!

by R. Bunnett

One tends to think of Ventnor as having an almost sub-tropical climate, so it seems to be somewhat unlikely that it should be hit by a blizzard.

One Friday evening in March 1952, I had been visiting my good friends Ralph and Phyllis Evans, the then owners of Under Rock, Shore Road, Bonchurch, and left there quite late to walk back to where I was living in St. Alban's Gardens - quite a long way, and mostly uphill. There was nobody about, and little, if any, traffic; there was a bitterly cold and quite strong wind, I believe from the north-east, but as I was a brisk walker, I was able to keep warm. When I awoke the following morning, I could see that everywhere was deep in snow and it was still snowing heavily.

I was then on the staff of the National Provincial Bank at 13 High Street. In those days, and for several years afterwards, we opened for business on Saturday mornings. There were four men on the staff at that time - the Manager, Mr. Timms, who lived along Park Avenue; his deputy, Mr. Whiteley, from Shanklin who travelled by bus; Peter Denham, who drove from Shide; and Keith Pitts, who lived with his parents in a flat over the tobacconist's shop on the corner of Pier Street.

Those of us who lived in Ventnor were able to walk to work, and had keys to the office. However, we did not have both keys necessary for us to be able to gain access to the cash safe, as one of these was held by Peter Denham, cashier at that time. So, although we were open, ***we were a Bank without cash!*** However, all was not lost! The Midland Bank across the road was forthcoming and came to our rescue. We were able to 'buy' sufficient cash from them (giving them a payment slip in settlement) to enable us to open for business. I am sure that we would have done the same for them in similar circumstances. As was only to be expected, customers were few and far between, but we at least able to offer them a service.

The snow continued to fall; the town was completely cut off by road, although I believe the train from Ryde was still able to struggle through until early on Saturday afternoon, before the line was blocked by drifts. It was, I believe, well into Monday before things began to return to normal. Some weeks later, at Easter, there were still patches of snow lying in sheltered gullies.



FORTHCOMING "ATTRACTIONS"

The meeting on September 28th is "A History of Blackgang" with Simon Dabell. On October 26th we will hear about "Movers and Shakers of Ryde." A note in my files says they visited Ventnor in March 1876 and spoke for an hour and a half to a crowded meeting at the Literary Institute (now the Library). November meeting to be confirmed.

The annual lunch is being held at Leconfield, Upper Bonchurch on November 23rd. There is a limit on numbers, so if you would like to attend, please contact Roger for arrangements.

LOOKING AHEAD

A note with reference to the AGM in March. If any officers/committee wish to resign, or if any members would like to join the committee, please could the Secretary be informed at the beginning of February 2013 in case ballot papers are needed. There will be a further reminder early next year.

MAKING MORE FRIENDS

As a result of the large amount of research work I do following up queries from the Museum and through personal enquiries at home, I have made so many new friends. I keep copies of all that I have done in ring-

binders and often, many years after completing research, I get a message saying something like: "We are coming to the Island on and would very much like to meet you."

This has happened on so many occasions now and is a fascinating part of my work. This year some more members of the Field (men's outfitters, 40 High Street) family came over from Australia and called on me. I had already met some of their close relations. The original Mr. Field emigrated with most of his family in 1884. A week or two after I met them, it was a strange coincidence when two ladies from Australia called at the Museum and said they were relations of the Fields too. They did not know the friends I had met, so I put them in touch with each other.

The research I mentioned in the last Newsletter regarding the Ussher family has been continuing. The Rev. Richard Ussher was in charge of St. Margaret's Church at the top of Lowtherville Road in the early 1880s, afterwards moving to be the first Priest-in-Charge of St. Alban's (the original tin church). His sons' memorial plaques in St. Mary and St. Rhadegund Church, Whitwell were originally at St. Margaret's. The family visited our Cemetery with me recently to see the grave of another son Richard.

I complete an average of three queries a week using Museum archives and then delving into my own research files to add to the interest for enquirers. Since the last Newsletter I have searched for details of members of old Ventnor families, information about local shop premises, houses and events. An unusual request was to photograph sundial memorials in our Cemetery (above left - a picture of one of those I found). I receive some lovely cards and letters of appreciation afterwards. If I am sent any donations they go in the Society fund for conserving fragile artefacts.

FHB

WRITE A LETTER?

It has been suggested that a space might be set aside in the Newsletter for letters from members. Obviously, owing to the fact that publication is only twice yearly, they would need to be something not time-related. How do you feel about it?

MEMORIES OF MY BOYHOOD by David White

I was in the infants' classes at Steephill Castle when it was a school, but I was transferred to South Street in 1946. At this school, the class often did a bit of singing together and some of us were encouraged to stand in front of the rest of the class and sing by ourselves. The awful meals were served by nuns in a building on the other side of the steps. Quite often they would come and listen to us singing and one of them thought I had a nice voice and said so to my mother. The result was that I was taken along to see the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church so he could listen to my voice. He promptly took me on as a young boy soprano in late 1946. We practised on Friday evenings and attended morning and evening service.

After a while I found that we were actually being paid two shillings a month (the church must have been very rich then). The kindly Vicar, whose name I have now forgotten, always arranged for us choirboys to have an old tarpaulin covered Bedford lorry to take us all to Flowers Brook once a month to have a game of football. One day in 1948, I found I was unable to sing properly and it transpired that my voice had broken early and it was awful to listen to after that. So I left the choir, rather furious that I could no longer control my voice.

In South Street, there was a small shop which sold everything and was run throughout the 1940s by an elderly lady named, I think, Miss Jones. When you purchased a bottle of pop from her, you could return the empty bottle to her, for which you received a refund of one penny. All these empty bottles would be placed on the floor by the end of the counter by the door. Us children soon learned to enter the shop and pick up one of these bottles before she emerged from the back room and present the bottle to her to get one penny! We never found out if she ever discovered that her stock of empty bottles never increased!

Although we had La Falaise as a hotel, it did not bring in enough money. So the family purchased 1 Bono Vista as a three-storey boarding house. This was half-way along North Street. From this house westwards there were only skeletons of destroyed houses on both sides of the road all the way down to West Street and Kent Road. Also complete destruction on West Street down to the High Street.

At weekends and school holidays we often played inside the large brick bomb shelter that had been erected in the road outside our house. We also climbed in and out of the ruined houses looking for money, which we often found.

Myself, Elsie Francis and Robin Perkins managed to get inside the church near the junction of West Street and High Street. It was very dark inside and difficult to move around due to the rubble covering the floor and pews. Suddenly part of the roof collapsed and fell on the piano near the altar. This made a ghastly ding-dong sound as it hit the wires because the lid was not on it! We fled the scene as we were so frightened and never dared to go in there again.

A regular lodger at Bono Vista was Len, who worked at Niton Radio Station. One day in 1947 he sent a message to say he was trapped inside the station due to heavy snow prevented his relief arriving. He had run out of food. No vehicles could move. Mum thought about snow shoes and we tied tennis rackets to our wellington boots which enabled us to walk on the snow without sinking in. It took us a day to get there and back home, very tired in the winter darkness. My mother received a letter thanking her for helping to keep the Radio Station going by her actions. Len had been trapped there for four days and had been on duty day and night until the replacement operator was able to get through.

MUSEUM PIECES

Strangely enough there is always more to report in the 'closed' season than when we are open. Of course, by then all the work preparing the exhibitions has been completed and as we are busy stewarding the Museum not so much office work gets done, any projects or improvements, where possible, get more attention in the winter time.

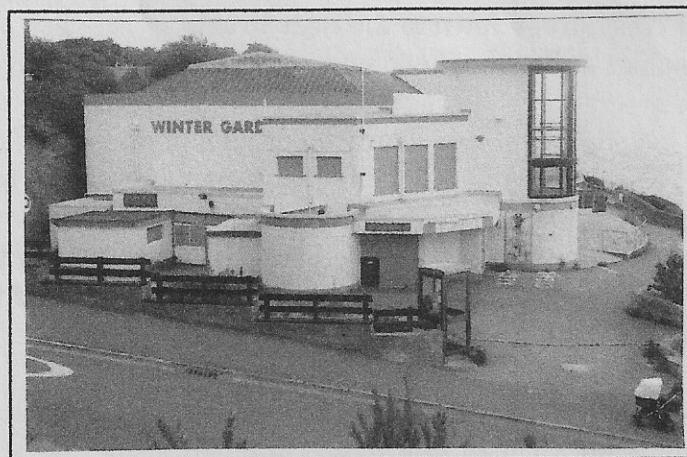
Last year there was much interest in our very large window view of Ventnor beach c1910. After a number of delays and problems, we have, mainly thanks to our Committee members Michael Freeman and Richard Downing, now got postcard copies of this for sale. We have also increased the number of DVDs, books, cards etc. with a local, or at least an Island, theme so the sales counter looks quite attractive and, I think, has some interesting items.

Visitor numbers (to the end of August) are holding up quite well, thanks, probably to the awful summer weather. When it is cold and raining, visitors naturally desert the beaches and countryside and seek indoor amusements. It looks as though numbers will, however, be slightly down on 2011, which was a record breaking year for us.

One of our new displays this season tells the 'Winter Gardens Story' and this has created a lot of interest with people enquiring what is happening down there. At the time of writing – nothing!.

We are continuing our policy of re-writing some of our early booklets. Re-issued in our new format is the story of our Harbour and Piers which was possibly the first booklet we ever did way back in the early 1980s. Now re-titled 'Seaside Story' it is available priced £2.50 plus postage.

Graham



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