

VENTNOR AND DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY Newsletter 22 - March 2013

FROM THE ARCHIVES. *V is for VENTNOR ROAD CARS*

I always felt sorry for the horses that had to work around the town, including, of course, up the steep hills to the railway station. They must have had a short life. What was needed was a different method of propulsion.

During the early years of the 20th century some motor bus services were introduced on the Island, and in 1913 Ventnor acquired its very own vehicle. Operated by Ventnor Road Cars Ltd. it was a 20 seat, single deck, Commer of about 30hp, described at the time as a handsome vehicle. We have a photograph of it (see below).

The bus arrived in the town in the July and was kept in a garage in Albert Street. Sixty six passengers were recorded on its first day in service. Its route was Pier Street, High Street, Holy Trinity Church, St.Boniface Road, up Hillside to the station and continued to Upper Ventnor. Fares were in one penny stages – the cost from the town to Upper Ventnor was 3d. The journey took 19 minutes with eleven return journeys per day. On Wednesday afternoons the bus was taken off the route and, instead, ran to Newport. Later, on Saturdays a service, which was well used, was run to Whitwell and Niton.

By 1914 it was found the service was struggling to be profitable and excursions were taking more of the buses' time, but, at least, they were successful. According to the Isle of Wight Mercury, some people were not satisfied that the bus was withdrawn for excursions and a letter from a dissatisfied traveller demanded the company run their bus according to the timetable. The outbreak of war in August 1914 saw the end of the venture.

Of course, other buses have run around the town. A favourite was Brown's Bus which connected with the railway arrivals and served the hotels.

In 1995, a small, open-top, single deck bus called the 'Ventnor Buggy' operated for the summer season. Unfortunately, it was not a success, but for one season this unusual machine was to be seen around the town. Another example of local enterprise for the town's transport system eighty-one years after our first bus ceased operations. - *Graham*



LOST ADVENTURES

I feel so very privileged to have gone to school and to have grown up in Upper Ventnor. Since those days I have seen quite a lot of the world and have visited many countries but if I had but one choice in life as to where to live I would have no hesitation but to return to Ventnor.

At last the long war was over and 1945 saw the soldiers and airmen who were stationed in Ventnor, returning home. Suddenly the gun emplacements on the Downs were emptied and we found ourselves free to roam the countryside. Saturday morning - and that could mean some sandwiches, a bottle of water if you could bother to carry one, and out for the day with my friends. Was it to be bows and arrows or catapults? No matter now, off we went up Steephilldown Road and, at the top, left turn through the swing gate and onto the path that ran along the bottom of Rew Downs. Following this path and reaching what was then the Golf Club we crossed the Whitwell Road here and, turning right, followed the path for a short distance until reaching a gap in the hedge. This was the way down to a cave. It was a bit of a scramble down the gap in the Undercliff and I'm sure that several of us lost the seat of our trousers at one time or another. It was not even much of a cave but we spent lots of time there exploring and digging in the soft sandstone, it led down to a narrow field which, at times was sown with carrots, some of which we sampled. From there it was on to Jellicoe's where, if we were lucky we could collect 'Conkers' from the trees lining the drive to the house that lasted until we were chased off down onto the St. Lawrence Road. From there it was heading home time, up Castle Road and the long climb up St. Alban's Steps.

What now takes but moments to tell must have taken us all day to experience but, because of the development that has taken place, can no longer be enjoyed by future generations, but for those who in the past took this path - what wonderful memories.

BILL MORGAN

THE NEXT FEW MEETINGS

April 26th - Brading Station Restoration

Project - Cathy Mills and Volunteers;

May 31st - A History of Flight - John Hibberd;

June 28th - Appuldurcombe - John Owen

MEMBERSHIP

Subscriptions were due for renewal on January 1st (£7.50 cash - or a cheque to the Ventnor History Society). Numbers are keeping up well and at the time of writing we already had about 95 paid-up members. Renewals may be made at the Heritage Museum on a Saturday morning (10-12.30) or by sending to me, as Membership Secretary. 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.

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

The pieces sent in by three members for the last Newsletter gained much approval and I received many comments on the interest they provoked. Please could we have some more input from members?

HOW ANNOYING!

Helping enquirers with their research gives me great pleasure but one of the things which is particularly annoying is the fairly common habit of changing a house name. Graham also finds this very irritating. Some house names in Ventnor have changed several times. Park Avenue "fits this bill." Fortunately through street directories and my research files at home, I can usually locate a place. Some of my index cards give the present name, and underneath "formerly and!!!" I did research for a lady on the mainland the other day whose forebears were in service here around 1911 and luckily was able to locate the house. More of her relations had lived in one of the terrace of houses which stood on the area now "The Swamp" car park. They were demolished. Why "The Swamp" you may ask - it is because the land was so wet in the mid 1800s that when piles were driven down with the idea of building a Town Hall there, they went in very easily! This was eventually rectified, of course.

AS WE SIT IN CHURCH

As we sit in St. Catherine's Church at our monthly meeting, and I look around, I think of the thousands of people who must have been in that same position since 1837. The foundation stone was laid on June 18th 1836 and the church was consecrated and first used for public worship on July 17th 1837. The site was presented by Major Popham Hill and the cost of building (said to be £4656) and endowment was undertaken by John Hambrough. It was enlarged in 1843 and again in 1850 when the chancel was added and galleries built on three sides. There were then 950 sittings (470 free). The first incumbent was the Rev. J. Noble Coleman.

Many changes have been made to the Church. In 1870 a new oak pulpit with turned standards and an oak staircase was completed costing £28. In July 1871 the organ was removed from the gallery to the chancel. In December 1871 the original pews were swept away and the local paper reported that "the modern notion of benches has been substituted." The two doors leading to side aisles were done away with and a centre doorway made opening on to a middle aisle and affording an uninterrupted view of the chancel immediately upon entering the church.

In a November 1872 paper, a visitor commented: "I trust that the warming apparatus may be speedily put in order, for it was so intensely cold in the middle of the church last Sunday, as to be almost unbearable."

One day in September 1883, the clock struck 83 times at 3 o'clock! The clock caused trouble for many years then and apparently in more recent years, but it is a feature of the church which I hope will always remain.

Joseph Jeffery, who died in 1885, played the barrel organ for 20 years to accompany the hymns. He turned the handle on the organ, one foot working the lever that kept the bellows inflated. He also led the vocal part of the service.

1894 hailed the new ventilating apparatus as a great success. It was said that formerly one was hardly able to breathe owing to the closeness of the atmosphere, but when the apparatus was used for the first time, those in the gallery found the improvement remarkable. The lighting from the roof was also an improvement.

The St. Catherine's Church spire was reported to be "likely to throw the famous leaning tower of Piza into the shade in July 1895, by reason of the increasingly diagonal direction it was assuming." However, experts said that it was perfectly safe. A lengthy meeting was held on the subject and as to whether several feet of the top section should be removed. The Vicar said that he had observed the spire from Hambrough Road and concluded that in the three years he had been in Ventnor, the top of the spire had moved 2-3 inches westward. The top seemed to be hanging over the base. It was agreed that work should take place to demolish about 21 feet and rebuild. The spire was eventually removed in 1920.

At the above meeting, a peal of bells was proposed but Mr. Thomas Gibbs was certain that the constant ringing would be objectionable to many invalids, who found it a great relief to escape from cathedral towns to Ventnor and be free of it. *(This 'struck' me as quite amusing as when Thomas Gibbs, a prominent town councillor, died a few years afterwards, his wife presented a large bell to the town and it was erected on the end of the Pier. For a long time it was in the Bell Bar at the Winter Gardens – where is it now, I wonder?)*

..... And History Society members, have you ever taken time to walk around the Church and read the words on the plaques on the walls. Many of those remembered contributed much to the life of Ventnor many years ago. There are windows given in memory of past residents too.

St. Catherine's Church has been in the town for 176 years – it is a long time and what a wealth of history has been made in Ventnor during that time. I am glad I have spent so much time gathering together information over many years – and a large amount of the text is cross-indexed, which makes it easier to answer most queries. Fay.

WALKING FESTIVAL TIME AGAIN

Everyone hopes that we will be having better weather in the months to come. The Walking Festival takes place in May again and the following walks may be of interest to members – all are free but any donations will go to our Society funds.

Wednesday, 8th May – 'Four Downs and a few Ups.' Meet at Blackgang Viewpoint car park at 10.15 a.m. A circular walk over four of the Island's Downs. 6 miles. 4.5 hours. Roger Silsbury. 01983 853621. No need to book.

Saturday, 11th May – 'Ventnor Downs: Prehistory to Cold War.' A circular downs history walk looking at Bronze Age round barrows, a medieval manor house, a military rifle range, a sandstone quarry, a Victorian railway station, RAF Ventnor and other historic sites. 5 hours; 5.5 miles. Booking essential. Richard Downing. 01983 856210; richarddowning5@btinternet.com

Wednesday, 15th May – 'A Ramble Around Wroxall.' Meet at St. Martin's Road car Park, Wroxall at 10.30 a.m. A circular walk around Wroxall with some stunning views. Eight miles. 5.5 hours. Roger Silsbury. 01983 853621. No need to book.

MUSEUM PIECES

As usual at this busy time of the year we are preparing our summer exhibition. The main theme is 'Along the Southern Shore' which is a look at life along our coastline from Luccombe to Chale. Also new, a feature on two St. Lawrence houses, namely 'Old Park' and 'St. Lawrence Hall', plus a visual treat as we present some of member Andy Butler's beautiful wildlife photographs of the Undercliff. A permanent 'Time-Line' lay-out is another of our ideas which we hope visitors will find interesting, and, indeed, instructive.

We have now produced four Town Trail leaflets covering the town, Bonchurch and Steephill, naturally featuring items of historical interest along the way. So time to go exploring, weather permitting!

To comply with current regulations we have had installed an up-to-date fire alarm system. This is needed for a building open to the public, also as we have an occupied flat upstairs.

Many thanks to Cowes Heritage who unearthed a package of documents relating to the Ventnor Gas & Water Co. dated from 1834 to 1895, and passed them on to us. Quite a find!

There has been much discussion in Committee about future Plans and Policies, and a sub-committee was formed to look into this matter. Although their report was felt to be too comprehensive for volunteers to take on, Policies dealing with Emergencies, Collections and the guidelines for our Review Committee have been updated.

In November we participated with St. Catherines Church as they celebrated their 175th anniversary. Our small exhibition seemed to be well received.

Graham.