



Ventnor Longshoremen



People often say that time flies, indicative of the pace of change of modern society. But there are occasions when the signs seem to suggest that time stands still. Looking at this picture, one sees a beach hut that has an all too familiar ring about it. Then there are the mallets neatly piled on a wooden shelf on the back of the open hut door. The clock face carefully placed to denote high water is familiar as well. Advertising boards on the hut indicate that windbreaks (or windscreens) are for hire. But hold on a minute: 50p for the hire of a windbreak, with a 10p deposit. We must be living in another age. Yes, the picture is close to 40 years old, taken in June 1985 to be precise. Jim Blake sits on the left, his brother Fred on the right, while standing behind is Viv Spencer. The Blake and the Spencer families had a long and distinguished history as longshoremen at Ventnor. They looked after beach-goers over many decades, sharing Ventnor's shore between them. In 1963, though, they very sensibly amalgamated as the winds of change brought in the foreign holiday package and all that meant for the British seaside.

One feature of Ventnor that has changed fundamentally is the absence of boats on the shore. In the 1960s, another twenty years earlier than the picture, there were no less than 40 row-boats and canoes for hire, Blakes having 24 and the Spencers 16. There were also a few dinghies, along with a number of motor-boats or launches that took beach-goers on short cruises. Today, however, the only signs of boating are a few kayaks and paddle-boards, most of which are provided by the beach-goers using them.

Over the later decades of the 20th-Century, issues of the *Isle of Wight Mercury* often recorded the passing of Ventnor longshoremen. What is striking is the range of their talents and achievements over their lifetimes. In 1961, for instance, it announced the death of Bill Spencer, eldest in a family of 14. Bill had spent his early working days at sea, in sail and steam ships. During the Great War, he was in charge of a Government tug, and in World War Two he worked at Saunders Roe. A fine sportsman in his youth, he played football for Ventnor and won many south coast regattas, along with his brother Bob Spencer, in their boat *Endymion*. The feature that seemed to be common to all Ventnor longshoremen was that almost every one of them was a clever handyman. Then, of course, there were the many beach-goers who, over the years, owed their lives to the rescue work of Ventnor's longshoremen, always with an eye on the sea state, their long experience alert to the times when bathers might be in difficulty. Happily, there is still a Beach Safety Team to keep an eye on bathers today.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, especially those of the late Fay Brown. Thanks also to Mike Tigg for his recollections of working on the beach as a teenager.