

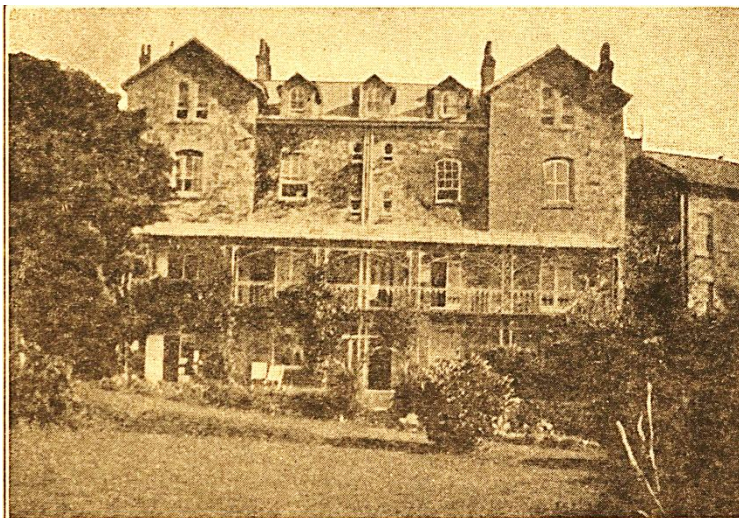


Carfax Pension



The three-storey stone building just beyond the St. Lawrence Inn is the *Carfax Pension* and forms the subject of this week's article. The word *Carfax* is Anglo-French and means a place where four roads intersect. Oxford has a well-known *Carfax Tower*, located where the four main routes into and out of the city intersect. St. Lawrence, of course, is just a village in the Undercliff, but someone at some time decided that this four road junction in the village centre deserved the same name reference. The French word *Pension* means a boarding house. It is one of only two examples I have come across of the use of such an appellation in the Undercliff (the other being the *Pension St. Vincent* on Ventnor Esplanade). It was probably chosen to try to reflect the Mediterranean-like setting of the building, south-facing

among wooded slopes in one of the warmest parts of the English coast. There were undoubtedly days when it might almost have been mistaken for the French Riviera. In turn, film buffs may recall the *Pensione Bertolini* in James Ivory's famous version of E.M. Forster's novel *A Room with a View*, the boarding house in this case in Florence. The novel is set in the Edwardian age and reflected a time when the higher English social classes held a consuming passion for the Mediterranean. But for those with less ample means, the Undercliff could be a welcome alternative.



The lower image shows the south elevation of the *Carfax Pension*, now revealing four storeys rather than three, the two lower ones with long verandahs, much like so many buildings in Ventnor. This grainy picture is taken from the boarding house's brochure of the late 1940s, with Mrs Sells the proprietress at the time. The brochure makes much of the recuperative powers of the Undercliff climate. Bookings were available for full board by the week or for bed and breakfast to passing guests. There were special terms for long stays. Suites of rooms could be also be arranged. However, guests were required to bring own towels, soap, emergency cards and ration books, making it clear that this was Britain under post-war austerity.

The *Carfax* building seems to have been constructed around the mid-1860s and was probably intended as a hotel, for what became known as St. Lawrence Inn was once described as the 'hotel tap'. By the 1930s, it was known as a high class boarding house, with Mrs Sells the proprietress from at least the mid-1930s, if not earlier. She was still there in the mid-1950s, though the label *Pension* had been dropped and it was, instead, the *Carfax Hotel*. After a few more years, however, the building was sold and refurbished for flats. At one point, there was a plan for its demolition, but, happily, this did not happen and so a fine feature of the centre of St. Lawrence has remained to this day.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre.



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

www.ventnorheritage.org.uk / telephone 855407

