

## Introduction

As we enter the winter season we can look back on a summer opening that saw many visitors and members commenting favourably on the museum – both the exhibitions and the layout. Certainly there have been particular successes:

- The Olivia Parkes display has been in place since mid-June. Great credit must go to John Elton for his remarkable model of her hut.
- The booklet *Bonchurch in 99 Old Postcards* is another success. People commented about the quality of the postcard reproductions and the range of views.
- The *Ventnor and D-Day* exhibition, marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Normandy Landings is accompanied by the booklet *Oh Day of Days!* Also popular has been the facsimile of the Ventnor Radar Station log-book for that period, where visitors can read the entries as the events unfold; this was donated to the Society by Martin Yates, who also lent us logbook for display during the exhibition.
- The new *Longshoreman* exhibition is likewise still on display. It includes a selection of photos taken by the late Daphne Carter in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as various images showing a practice launch of the rocket-fired breeches buoy apparatus, used for rescuing people.

Our thanks must go to all the volunteers who work hard to produce these books and displays.

*Mick Pye, Newsletter Editor*

## Volunteers' Social Afternoon, October 2024:

We spent a very enjoyable two hours in the Exchange on 10 October, chatting, enjoying coffee, cake, and surprise entertainment from by Danny McMeechan with his guitar. An excellent chance to meet up with colleagues, especially those we don't know well - we must do this more often!

*Leigh Geddes (who also took the photographs!)*



## STOP PRESS: STOP PRESS: STOP PRESS:

We're excited to be able to report that the **South Wight Chronicle** is re-launching on the 1st November! It will initially be issued on a monthly basis and will be edited by local Will Harvey who brings a huge amount of relevant experience to the publication, having worked in and around Fleet Street for most of his career. As before, the Society will be contributing regular historical articles so be sure to get your copy from the usual outlets in town.

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## Musings from the Curator's desk . . .



So it would appear that I am now a Museum Curator, who would have thought it? I'm not sure anything more than plenty of enthusiasm and energy qualifies me for such an important role, but as always I will do my best to get it right more than I get it wrong.

When I was first asked to take on the responsibility, I sat down and gave it a lot of thought. What would it entail, what were the immediate priorities, what could I bring to the role? To my mind, there were two aspects that would benefit from some immediate action, one related to the 'Front of House' and one to the 'Back of House'. Both seemed to me to be linked by the same question, a question that is a challenge for pretty much every, and all museums: how do we interpret (showcase) the collection/archive to a local/national/global audience to the maximum benefit of all parties? This is one of the key responsibilities of any Curator.

Like all museums, 95% of everything we hold in our archive (there are over 18,000 entries in the database) rarely sees the light of day, either in the front of house displays, online or in publications. Additionally, we specifically suffer from a lack of physical space both in terms of storage and display that quickly impacts our ability to make the most of what we have to offer on a local basis.

When it comes to **Front of House**, within the museum we have our existing display boards, cabinets, bespoke displays and video offerings. We have our Ventnor Heritage Centre Facebook group (if you are not already a member of that, please do join) and we have the *South Wight Chronicle* (just re-launching – see page 1, above). All of these work, but could they work better and if so, how?

The displays are great (the Olivia display is a perfect example) but they take a lot of effort and time to set up. The intention for 2025 is to have a display in memory of Kevin Garlick's cobbler's shop (we were donated a large amount of his tools and materials this year), and to do this will require a lot of work. Even changing or updating display boards can be time consuming and there is only a limited amount of output that can be added to them.

I find myself asking whether it is time to do something more drastic? Nobody really likes too much change, but without it, do we become stale and discourage repeat visitors to the premises? Should we consider a full re-jig of the front of house, even dismantling the model railway and reclaiming all that space for other purposes (physical displays, digital output, oral histories) or am I likely to get lynched for daring to even suggest such a thing?

As members, what do you think; time to change or 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'?

Personally, I'd love to see us try something different in the Museum, creating more space to offer more displays in different formats. New ideas and approaches only work if they are balanced and don't equate to an un-manageable amount of work by a small group to make them into a reality.

When it comes to **Back of House** (the Research Room), the lack of space is ever more evident, but possibly easier and less contentious to address.

Over the Winter, I'll be attempting a re-jig, both in terms of layout and storage. At the same time, we'll be working on the backlog of accessioned items awaiting incorporation into the archive. At a minimum, this combination of approach will save us space and make things generally a little tidier, but it could also improve our ability to quickly put our hands on specific materials, benefitting all parties.

Consequently we are always open to more volunteers offering to help. The more people we have helping, the more we can open the museum. As well as doing what we want to do – making the history of our area available to local people and visitors – this has a knock-on effect on the finances, either through sales at our front desk or online, or through donations. The museum is currently struggling for funds, and any fund-raising ideas would be very welcome – please contact our secretary through the website. We would also welcome any ideas that you have regarding increasing membership numbers.

So what do you think? I don't pretend to have the monopoly on good ideas (nor bad for that matter) so would love to hear from any and all of you – what would you do? Please send any thoughts/questions/concerns to me at [paul.kingswell@ventnorheritage.org.uk](mailto:paul.kingswell@ventnorheritage.org.uk) . Thank you.

## Student Volunteers

University students Gemma Jones and Eloise Barry joined us during their summer vacations in 2021 (Gemma) and 2022 (Eloise). Both from South Wight, they volunteered with us for several days a week, working around their studies and summer jobs.



As Museum Stewards, they welcomed the public, shared local history information and set up their own research projects.

They also assisted with the guided walks which we run with author Stephan Roman, who leads the walks and tells the story of the colourful Russian political and literary visitors to Ventnor in the mid-19th century, while we add context about the town - often in a high wind, to an audience not used to Ventnor's hills.

When Gemma and Louise left, we helped them on their way with good references, and both now work in the heritage sector.

Gemma (*top left*) was studying for an MA in Museum Development when she joined us in summer 2021, and valued all we could show her about the inner workings of a local museum and registered charity.



During her time with us, she also volunteered at Carisbrooke Castle Museum with its important costume collection, and clearly made an impression: after completing her MA and other activities, she is now their Assistant Curator, saying "Without your support I wouldn't have been offered this opportunity."

Eloise (*below left*) was with us from May to September 2022; she created a photo calendar for the Society and a display board in the Museum about the history of her home village of Whitwell. Experienced volunteers showed her the formal structure of the Society and the care of the archive and database, and she used this to further her own research and reply to enquiries from callers and visitors. Following an MA in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Eloise is now working as a Visitor Assistant with English Heritage.

Both students were invaluable volunteers, great fun to have around, and were welcomed by other Museum stewards, sharing the work of the museum and lending their IT savvy on request. We wish them both well in their chosen careers as museum professionals.

*Leigh Geddes*

## Notes and Queries

Among the various public queries we've had since the last newsletter, there were two I was unable to provide much of an answer for. I'm hoping our members might be able to help. If you know anything useful, contact me at the e-mail address below.

- 1) Does anyone remember – or have any information about – an accident that happened on the Shute leading to Upper Ventnor when a car fell into a hole one night as it opened up, probably in the 1980s or 1990s?
- 2) Can anyone shed light on manufacturer or seller of this cast-iron fireplace back-plate? Could it have come from Scott's, or some other Island company? Maybe you have one just like it? It's from an old Victorian fireplace discovered on the Mainland.

Dr Jeffrey Mazo, [secretary@ventnorheritage.org.uk](mailto:secretary@ventnorheritage.org.uk)



## The Crazy World of 1920s Postage Costs

With the cost of 1<sup>st</sup> class postage having just gone up again to £1.65, it's interesting to look back around 100 years to see the position then. In 1922 the cost of postage was just 1½d. Also, you got up to 4 deliveries a day, making postcards almost the inter-war equivalent of a text message. However, postage costs were determined by the *length and type of message* rather than by the weight or size of what was being sent. Whoever thought that was a good idea!?! The big news in October 1922 was that the Postmaster General was going to reduce the cost to just 1d to encourage use. Additionally, if the sender limited their message to a 'phrase of courtesy or conventional character' of no more than 5 words, [perhaps something like 'Wish you were here'], and crossed out the printed wording 'Picture Postcard' on the back of the card, replacing that with 'Printed Matter' the postage cost was reduced to just ½d.

On the example from 1925, there is even a printed note to remind the sender that they can qualify for the cheapest rate if they limit themselves to five words of conventional character and mark it as Printed Matter. However, in this instance, they've decided to stick with the 1d postage option. This is not surprising, with the ambiguity surrounding what constituted a 'phrase of courtesy' versus an ordinary phrase leading to many surcharges for the recipient, even if the sender used less than 5 words!

'Hope you are all well' might be acceptable but 'See you tomorrow morning' might not. It was often easier to stick with the 1d option and squeeze in as many words as you could!

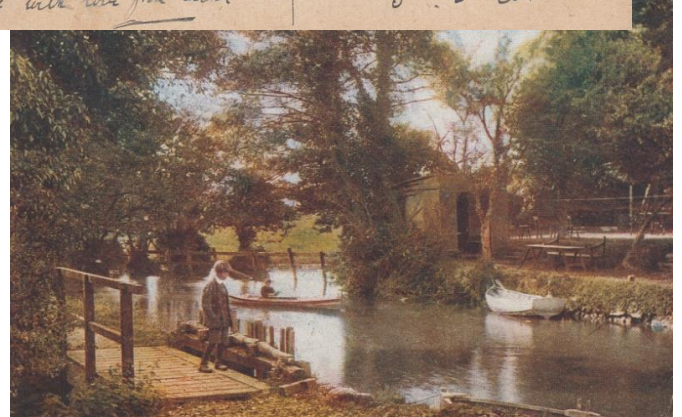
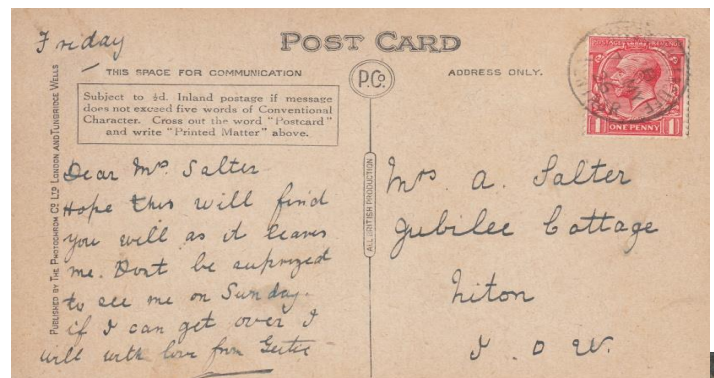
*Paul Kingswell.*

## ISLE OF WIGHT MERCURY STORY (10 October 1952)

On Friday October 10th 1952 the full-size, four page newspaper told a story of an elderly lady who had just had a telephone fixed in her house. She "phoned the operator at the exchange to make a complaint. 'My telephone cord,' she said, 'is too long. Would you please pull it back at your end.'"

The newspaper from a couple of weeks earlier had two, more serious stories. The first told that the Ventnor West Railway owners had made two ghastly mistakes. Firstly, they misled the public about the object of the line and the reality. The original idea was to build a line right into Ventnor at a low level – competing with the Isle of Wight Railway (IOWR). However, by calling it the 'St Lawrence' line many people assumed that it terminated there. Another issue was money; there was never enough, and this had some dire consequences. First it had to close the Ventnor station for a while, with customers forced to walk three and a half miles to Ventnor town! Secondly, the engine ('Godshill') had to go to St John's in Ryde for repairs. The IOWR insisted on a 'cash and carry' basis, but this bill could not be paid. The engine was chained to rails in Ryde, and had a 24 hour watchman guarding it. After a fortnight the money was raised, but the episode had an impact on the company's reputation.

The second story was of a woman from Galway, who came to Britain in 1939, joined the Woman's Auxiliary Corps, and after the War trained as a nurse. She came to work in the Royal National Hospital. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis prior to this but wanted to continue nursing. She was x-rayed monthly, and eventually it was decided to operate on her lung. Unfortunately, Miss Cagney died on the operating table in the hospital – at the age of 37 years. The article doesn't only reflect a sad story of a brave woman, committed to public service, but also the high-reputation of the R.N.H. and how well known Ventnor was in those days.



## Obituary: Janet Griffin 1952–2024

It is with both great sadness and smiles that we remember long-time Society member, volunteer and Trustee Janet Griffin, who died at the Mountbatten Hospice in Newport on 26 July after a four-year battle with cancer. The photograph here shows Janet working on our stall at the first 'Ventnor Day' in 2017, in Salisbury Gardens.

Janet was heavily involved in community activities on the Island, including her work with the Isle of Wight Family History Society and the Ventnor and District Local History Society. Although born in Aldershot, she moved to the Island as a teenager and knew more Island history than many who have lived here for generations. She was part of East Cowes Friends, recorded gravestones inscriptions, attended meetings of the Industrial Archaeology Society and helped keep the Kingston graveyard tidy. She once took the family out to the White Horse in Whitwell to celebrate the 200yr wedding anniversary of one of her ancestors who lived there.

She started volunteering with the Ventnor and District Local History Society almost from the beginning, continuing for over 30 years and serving in many capacities until the Covid pandemic. She became a Trustee in 1992, Vice-Chair in 1999 and Chair in 2007. In 2017 she stepped back and again became Vice-Chair, and continued in that role officially until 2023. She would spend her Mondays in the Heritage Centre, working on the archive, and religiously attended the member meetings on the last Friday of the month. Her daughter recalled that those days were always chip-shop dinners so Janet and her husband could leave early for the talks. In the summers, the children would be left with their grandparents in Ventnor for walks to Bonchurch or the Botanic Gardens so Janet could go into the Centre.



Many Society members will have known Janet much better, for much longer, than I did, and will have their own fond memories. Janet was Chair when I began to volunteer as a Steward in 2015. I was on duty in the Centre on Mondays to begin with, and was particularly interested in archival work, so I quickly go to know her. By the time I became a Trustee in 2019 she had stepped down to Deputy Chair, but I worked closely with her as a fellow Trustee for four years until her illness meant she felt she could no longer continue. Even then she remained keenly interested in the Society's work, often e-mailing me with comments about stories in the newsletter or our monthly talks. She still attended the talks and AGMs from time to time, and never failed to extend her apologies when she was unable to make it. She remained positive, keeping up her daily walks and even taking up sleep yoga and line dancing after her diagnosis. I am grateful to have known her, even for a relatively short time.

Janet is survived by her husband Ralph, daughters Alex and Felicity, son Lawrence and eight grandchildren. I am grateful to Alex for providing a copy of the eulogy she and Felicity prepared for her mum for our archive, and for permission to draw on it for this obituary.

The photograph on the right shows a Society visit to Moorhills, Whitwell in 1982; some of our longstanding members may remember the event - a young Janet and Ralph Griffin are standing centre back in the photograph.



*Dr Jeffrey Mazo, Secretary Ventnor & District Local History Society*

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