

VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Newsletter 49

April 2026

INTRODUCTION

The Heritage Centre is now open for the summer. The hours of opening are given below. Plans are in place for some new exhibits. Much of the recent past has been taken up with organising the AGM, which is reported in detail in this newsletter. All members, I'm sure, will agree in thanking Lesley for her work as Chair – it is time-consuming. Similarly, our thanks go to Paul Kingswell, who is stepping down for personal reasons. His work, especially as Treasurer, has been valued.

We are still very much in need of a volunteer Treasurer, and if you are prepared to do this, or know somebody who can help, then please contact the new Chair, Jeff Mazo, through the website. Any volunteers to help staff the museum once a week would also be welcome.

If there are any comments you have about the newsletter or you wish to comment on any of the content then, again, please contact us. It would be a positive thing, we feel, if the newsletter could include comments on the content or whether you have a story/experience related to something mentioned in the newsletter.

MUSEUM SUMMER OPENING HOURS

The Heritage Centre and Museum is now open for the summer (April to October) Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings (10am–1pm) and all day on Fridays (10am–4pm).

WHAT'S THIS?

We've been contacted by the Special Collections Department at Southampton University Library, who are currently cataloguing 19th-century engravings from the Cope Collection on Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

In your April 2026 newsletter:

Introduction	<i>Page 1</i>
Museum Opening Hours	<i>Page 1</i>
What's This?	<i>Page 1</i>
Old Newsletter Issue	<i>Page 2</i>
In Memoriam: Richard Downing	<i>Page 3</i>
Annual General Meeting	<i>Page 4</i>
Quiz Night Questions	<i>Page 7</i>
Isle of Wight Mercury	<i>Page 8</i>
Upcoming Society Meetings	<i>Page 10</i>

Editor: Mick Pye

One is of Ventnor Cove, engraved by Benjamin Winkles, which appeared in Barber's *Picturesque Illustrations of the Isle of Wight*. They've asked us if we could identify what the items hanging on the pulley system in the tree to the right might be, and if the construction in the foreground on the right is a well. We are pretty sure the construction in the foreground on the right is not a well but a capstan for winching boats up onto the beach (it is missing its crossbar). But we can't agree on what is hanging on the tree. Does anyone have any ideas?



Picture Credit: University of Southampton, Hartley Library, Archives and Special Collections. See <https://library.soton.ac.uk/Cope> for background on the Cope Collection.

OLD NEWSLETTER ISSUE

We have recently gone through the website to ensure that all back issues of the Newsletter are available online, including the six "Covid Specials" that were sent out during lockdown. However, we have been unable to locate a copy of newsletter number 23 (September 2013). If anyone has a copy, electronic or paper, we'd be grateful if you could send us a copy so we can complete the set.

IN MEMORIAM: RICHARD DOWNING (1946-2026)

Society members will be saddened to learn of the recent death of Richard Downing at St. Mary's Hospital in Newport. Richard was a loyal supporter of VDLHS over more than ten years, acting as a regular steward in season, serving as a trustee for several years, organising guided walks in the summer, and perhaps most important of all, forming part of the team of volunteers that re-organised and refurbished the museum over 2016-18.



Richard had a very genuine interest in Ventnor history and in the Undercliff. He was a volunteer with the National Trust, becoming an expert on St Boniface Well, located on the upper slopes of St Boniface Down's south face where once a chalk stream issued from the strata there. He also had a close interest in 'real ale' campaigns and, in association, developed a detailed historical knowledge of local breweries as well as the many hostelries that came into being across the wider Undercliff. One of the brewery exhibitions he curated for the Museum remains on display today and his accompanying booklet is still for sale in the Museum shop. He was actually a regular contributor to new exhibitions, including one on the prehistory of the Undercliff. He was also very game to join in with special events.

Richard and his partner Sally moved to Gills Cliff Road in Ventnor in 2007. His career background was in the library world, ending up as Librarian at Thames Valley University. Such expertise was perfect for some of the needs of the History Society, especially its ever-expanding archive.

Not unrelated to his Society work was his involvement in founding the Ventnor & Undercliff Heritage Partnership, along with John Allen, Evelyn Knowles and Ann Hutchings around 2014. This was the organisation that developed the many 'Trail-boards' that are found at strategic viewpoints in the town. The project eventually gained Heritage Lottery Funding and the boards are now managed by Ventnor Town Council.

Richard's final years were marred by the diagnosis of dementia and he moved to a care home in Havenstreet. However, his contribution to the life of the thriving community that is Ventnor remains for all to see. He was a kind friend to many and a thoughtful working colleague.

Michael Freeman

2026 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2026 AGM was held on Friday 27 March in the Masonic Lodge on Grove Road. The Trustees and Officers elected for 2026/27 are:

Dr Jeffrey Mazo	Chair and Trustee
Lesley Telford	Deputy Chair and Trustee
Sarah Kelly	Secretary and Trustee
John Carter	Treasurer and Trustee
Leigh Geddes	Trustee
Maria Morgan	Trustee
Mick Pye	Trustee

Chair's Report

In Lesley's absence Jeff presented her report for the previous year. She thanked the team of stewards for their excellent work and enthusiasm that allowed us to open the museum for an extra half-day a week, with the schedule of four mornings and one afternoon expected to be maintained for the 2026 season. The major displays over the last year included a new exhibition featuring Kevin Garlick, the Ventnor shoemaker who made hand-crafted shoes as costumes for films, plays, and re-enactments; an exhibition on Olivia Parkes (including John Elton's scale model of her hut); a panel showing some of the decorative Victorian and Edwardian billheads in our collection; and an exhibition on Innell Jolliffe, the pioneer local newspaper proprietor and editor who ran the *Isle of Wight Advertiser* from 1915 to 1923.

Monthly talks this past year included Andy Butler and Alan Clark with their Isle of Wight Scrapbook talks, Paul Kingswell with talks on pictorial history, Mark Earp on the Isle of Wight Women's Movement, Paul Thompson with two more talks on the developing story of the 1943 German Kommando Raid on RAF St Lawrence, and Jeff Mazo, who gave us the second part of his series on Ventnor in Old Maps, and also provided the fiendish questions for Ventnor History Quiz Night in January.

In the archive, work on digitising the collection continued, with Stephen Day continuing to scan our photographic collection, while work began to scan Fay Brown's photograph albums, which contain hundreds of images of Ventnor streets and shops in the 1980s and 90s.

We welcomed Poppy Morris, who joined us in June on a work experience placement in the archive funded by the Ventnor Exchange's "Brave Island" project. She was a great addition to the team, and, as part of her work, developed an Instagram account for the Society.

The archive room was reorganised and refitted during the year to create a better working environment, with Society members generously coming forward with donations to cover part of the cost of the work.

The Review Committee (Colin Beavis, Andy Butler, Carol Dashwood, Anne Mundell, Roger Silsbury and Paul Kingswell) finally cleared the backlog of donated items that had built up over several years. All donated items had now been examined and accessioned, passed on,

or (rarely) disposed of as not suitable for the Collection. Work had now begun on indexing them.

Our new book last summer was *Godshill in 99 Old Postcards*, the third in our successful Postcard series. During the year we had also been working on several books due for publication in 2026, including an update of our *History of St Catherines Home and School*, and three books about growing up in the last century in Godshill, Whitwell and Ventnor.

The Society newsletter was sent to all our members in April and November last year, and January this year. In 2026 and beyond there would be a total of four at fixed three-month intervals. Lesley thanked Mick and all our contributors for producing an entertaining and professional newsletter – an invaluable way for us to keep in touch with our members.

Our Business Sponsorship Scheme, set up late in 2025, already had twelve local businesses signed up: Burfields Antiques, Art & Design; Carnaby Diner & Bowie's Bar; Chiverton's Fishing Tackle; Crave Ice Cream; Five a Day; Lesley's Nutshell; Luchelle Boutique; Masala Bay; The Old Clock Shop; Premier Store; The Spyglass; and Ventnor Butchers.

We were delighted to welcome several new volunteers this year: in March 2025 Sarah Kelly became our new Society Secretary, which enabled Jeff to concentrate on research and publications. Graham Colenutt joined us as a Steward at Easter, Alan Kelly took on the management of our Membership database and renewals, and just recently Meriel Mann and Vanessa Wade had joined us. Volunteers were essential to the work of the Society, and Leigh Geddes has been the lynchpin, keeping in touch with everyone, continuing to manage the Steward rota, and organising our occasional informal (and very welcome) social get-togethers. On her behalf, Lesley extended profound thanks to all our volunteers for the contribution of their individual energy, expertise, local knowledge, imagination, good sense, attention to detail and willingness to engage with visitors and residents, which make the Society and Heritage Centre live and breathe.

In sad news, in January 2026 we lost longstanding Society member and volunteer, Richard Downing, who died after a long illness (see obituary earlier in this issue). He was much missed.

Finally, Lesley thanked all our Members, with their abiding fascination with the past, their desire to share their knowledge and memories, their willingness to chip in and ask questions, and the fact that they are prepared to come out on cold windy evenings to meet up and enjoy a talk – for without members there would be no Society.

Treasurer's Report

Outgoing Treasurer Paul Kingswell reported that the Society had an operating loss of £8,105 in 2025. Although this sounded quite scary, it included two exceptionally large expenditures: a replacement printer/copier (the previous one had given up the ghost after years of use), which cost £1,440, and the replacement shelving (the existing shelving had been in place since 1987 and was no longer safe nor fit for purpose), which cost £5,404. The remaining operating loss was only £1,261. This was not ideal, falling between 2024's loss (£688) and 2023's

(£2,425). The formal budgeting process continued to be beneficial, allowing us to make tough decisions (such as making those exceptional purchases) based on fact rather than fiction.

The Society currently remained financially viable, with cash assets of £1,635.48, cash savings of £8,162.47 and stock to the value of £5,855.98), but operating costs remained high despite efforts over the last two years to find cheaper providers and consolidate costs where possible. Maintaining the Heritage Centre and Museum was a significant expense, including telephone, broadband and website support, fire and intruder alarms, insurance, electricity and water. Cleaning had now been taken over by volunteers, resulting in a significant savings. Business rates were a major expense, with the Isle of Wight Council's elimination of discretionary rate relief for charities. Overall, Paul believed we had done a good job of maintaining the operating expenses of the Society.

On the income side, membership levels remained steady but the increase in the membership rate meant more funds coming in. Donations were virtually the same as the previous year. Publication sales, our major source of income, were significantly down (£3,293 vs £4,781), although we were still ahead of the 2023 figure.

The Society's Future: A Warning

Incoming Chair Jeff Mazo said he was, on the one hand, more optimistic about the current state and future of the Society as he had ever been since Covid. Over the last year or two, we had turned the corner and were beginning to rebuild. Thanks to the founders of the Society in the 1980s, the dedicated members and volunteers over the last forty or so years, and the enthusiasm of new volunteers and Trustees, we had what he firmly believed was one of the best local history collections and museums in the country.

But we were still short of what we had before Covid, and many of the current Trustees had stayed on longer than they had originally agreed to, to help get the Society through the hard times, but were now looking to step back or step down after another year. None of this was due to lack of interest or lack of commitment to the Society and its goals, but was down to changing personal circumstances. So this year would be another rebuilding year. We absolutely needed more Trustees, at the very least, to take us forward.

And there was one matter of crucial importance. With Paul's departure as Treasurer after four years (two more than he had originally volunteered for), and in the absence of another qualified candidate, John Carter had agreed to be Treasurer, with assistance from other Trustees, but could himself not commit to more than a year at most and would like to step down as soon as a replacement can be found. The Society needs someone with the right skill set willing to act as Treasurer for a period of at least two years and preferably more, beginning no later than the 2027 AGM. We had searched unsuccessfully, with frequent appeals for volunteers, for someone for over two years. If someone did not step forward this year, the Society simply would not be able to continue to function, legally or practically.

Jeff fervently hoped this could be avoided. This was not a long-term institutional problem – the Society was otherwise financially sound, had an active membership and good team of volunteers and provided a tremendous resource for the local community and beyond. But

without volunteers there was a real possibility that we were having to plan for now for the orderly wrapping up of the Society in early 2027 rather than face a sudden crisis that March. Part of this planning would be a consultation with the membership, including devoting a monthly meeting to a more detailed exploration and open discussion of the situation and the alternatives. [This meeting is now scheduled for our normal meeting date in May – see below.] The Trustees were open to any constructive suggestions and ideas. If the worst were to happen, the Society Constitution set out procedures for winding up, including a vote of two-thirds of the members attending a General Meeting with 30 days notice.

Jeff stressed that this was purely precautionary – if the worst did happen, we needed to be prepared for it. But he also didn't want to gloss over the seriousness of the situation. He repeated the plea that if anyone knew anyone with the skills, experience and interest to be a good Treasurer, to let us know, and let us know soon. In the meantime, the important work of the Society would go on as normal.

QUIZ NIGHT QUESTIONS

In January we held the first of what might be an annual series of Quiz Evenings. There were fifty questions in total, over five rounds: two general knowledge rounds, a "Pub Quiz" (questions about pubs), a picture round and an obscure trivia round. Over the next few newsletters we'll be presenting the questions so people who didn't make it on the night can have a go. This time we start with the ten questions from round one – these are probably the easiest ones from the quiz. How well can you do? (Answers are at the end of the newsletter.)

1. What buildings now occupy most of the site of the Old Mill?
2. The Ventnor Botanic Garden is on the site of what institution?
3. What is the oldest building in the Undercliff?
4. Which local musician was the Drum Major for the Ventnor Comic Jazz Band for over 50 years?
5. The family of which poet owned East Dene in Bonchurch?
6. Where did Charles Dickens stay in Bonchurch?
7. What book did he work on there?
8. Where did Karl Marx live when he stayed in Ventnor?
9. Who had Steephill Castle built?
10. What was the original use for the building that now houses the Heritage Centre?

ISLE OF WIGHT MERCURY

This time the articles come from the newspaper published on 18 July 1969. The next photographs are illustrations of how lives have changed since the 1960s – which many of our members lived through.

It is easy to forget the scale of changes. The following story reflects how house telephones were becoming more popular as the 50s and 60s went on. Demand for phones became so great that there was a considerable waiting list to have them fitted. There were exceptions – if you were an on-call policeman then your phone fitting was accelerated. The developing numbers of phones at home is reflected in the telephone numbers – extending from three to five (and later more) over a relatively short period of time.

PHONE 1007

COMPLETE GARDENING SERVICE
Lawnmowing • Fencing • Logs • Tree-Felling

**ISLAND PHONES UP BY
OVER 100 A MONTH**

Ventnor telephones go automatic with the opening of the new exchange in the High Street, in September, 1970.

There are now 102,000 phones in the Isle of Wight and the number increases by about 140 a month. The Island phones form only 16% of the total in the Portsmouth/I.W. area.

The I.W. Post Office Services Advisory Committee has voted unanimously that the Isle of Wight section of the telephone directory should remain separate.

A further reminder appears in the two advertisements below.

USED CAR MART

1969	Ford Corsair 2000 E, white with black vinyl roof and black interior. A local low mileage vehicle having all the usual 2000 E fittings, radio etc., a considerable saving on new price ...	£945
1968/69	Vauxhall Viva SL 1600, 2 door, white with black upholstery, excellent all round appearance, this is one of our own well maintained vehicles ...	£695
1966	Ford Transit Mini Bus, 12 seater, one owner from new. White with black interior well maintained, exceptional value for ...	£525

CAR OF THE WEEK

1968	(reg. 69) model Vauxhall Victor, 1600 saloon. Low mileage, one owner finished in white with red interior, individual front seats, 4 speed gear box, outstanding condition ...	£795
------	---	------

1966	Austin A60, grey with red flash, red interior a very roomy 4/5 seater saloon, radio and fog lights fitted ...	£495
1966	Vauxhall Victor Super, red with beige interior, one owner from new ...	£470

Canning Day
LIMITED

AUCTIONEERS' NOTICES

ALBERT BULL & PORTER

21, CHURCH STREET, VENTNOR. Tel. 21
108, REGENT STREET, SHANKLIN. Tel. 2138

VENTNOR. New to the market, freehold detached bungalow, overlooking the town and enjoying good sea views. Recently erected this spacious property comprises, lounge 13' x 12' 6", 3 bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, separate w.c., sun lounge etc. Detached garage, attractive garden well stocked with rose bushes and flowering shrubs. All mains. £6,750.

WROXALL. Detached 3 bedroom bungalow in the course of erection. Lounge 13' x 15', fitted kitchen, integral garage. Purchasers choice of bathroom suite and decorations. Plot size 40' x 130'. £5,350.

VENTNOR. Semi-detached house above the town with full solid fuel central heating, well decorated and ready for immediate occupation. 2 reception, 4 bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, separate w.c. Small garden, all mains. £4,950.

NITON. Post war detached chalet bungalow standing in ½ acre of garden. Lounge/dining room, 25' x 15', 3 bedrooms, fitted kitchen, bathroom etc. Detached garage with tarmac drive. Freehold. Good order. £7,750.

VENTNOR. Double fronted cottage style property in central position close to bus stops, shops, clubs and Esplanade. 2 reception, 4 bedrooms, bathroom, kitchen etc. Small walled garden. Freehold. All mains. £4,200 to include the good quality contents.

UPPER VENTNOR. Semi-detached cottage property in excellent order. 2 bedrooms, 2 reception, kitchen with new sink unit, new bathroom. Small garden front and rear. £2,750.

The first indicates the price of used cars – many models of which we remember. It is worth remembering that the average working wage in 1966 for men (over 21) was £20.6s in old money (£20.30). For women it was £10.1s (£10.07). The cheapest used car here is equivalent to almost half a year's work. But then, with tongue in cheek, who wanted a Vauxhall Victor...?



The next advert is about the sale of houses. In the later sixties the town's fortunes were beginning to suffer economically. The closure of the railway in 1966 had not helped.

Hence, the prices of houses, whilst expensive in those years, appear cheaper when compared to parts of the mainland. The average UK price for a two bedroom bungalow at this time was £3000 to £4500. The Upper Ventnor one here is below the lower end of this.

On the front page there was a prominent photograph of the Royal National Hospital. It is not surprising that it has the attention of the newspaper given its role in Ventnor's history.

Its establishment, it can be said, put Ventnor 'on the map', and its reputation extended the knowledge of Ventnor nationally, and I would propose, internationally as well. Whilst making inroads into the improvement in treatments for seriously ill people, it also benefited this area in terms of work for locals, and monies coming into the economy. The building had been derelict for several years and this shows the eastern end of what remained. A Gosport firm were the demolition contractors. The Town Council had bought the 12 acre site for £12,500 after committing it to become an open space for the town's people. It is now the site of the Botanic Gardens.

QUIZ ANSWERS

1. Alexandra Gardens. 2. The Royal National Hospital. 3. The Old Church, Bonchurch. 4. James "Skimbo" White. 5. Algernon Swinburne. 6. Winterbourne. 7. *David Copperfield*. 8. Chemnitz (1 Boniface Gardens). 9. John Hambrough. 10. A.J. Sharpe Furnishings.

UPCOMING SOCIETY MEETINGS

24 April	The History of St Catherine's Home and School	Mick Pye
29 May	Open Discussion/Consultation: The Future of the VDLHS	
26 June	Ventnor and District, The Early Years	Andy Butler & Alan Clark

All Meetings at 7:30 PM in the Masonic Hall on Grove Road



Ventnor and District Local History Society
Ventnor Heritage Museum, 11 Spring Hill, Ventnor PO38 1PE
Tel: 01983 855407 / Email: info@ventnorheritage.org.uk
Newsletter Editor: Mick Pye
www.ventnorheritage.org.uk

