VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Newsletter 50 July 2026



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OPEN MEETING REPORT: THE FUTURE OF THE SOCIETY

An open public meeting was held at the Yarborough Masonic Hall on Grove Road on Friday 29 May 2026 to discuss issues relating to the future of the Society. A discussion paper was circulated to the membership in advance and copies were provided to non-members at the meeting.

The discussion was wide-ranging and lively, covering problems with recruiting new Trustees and Officers (and especially a Treasurer), the structure of the Society's governance and financial mechanics, funding issues, and worst-case options.

The Trustees were heartened by the number of people attending the meeting or sending messages of support, especially non-members. The response to the immediate crisis – the need for a new Treasurer and bookkeeper – has been encouraging, with several people coming forward as potential volunteers. Discussions are ongoing and we hope to have some good news soon.

A full report has been circulated to members by e-mail and is available on the website.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

Do you regularly come to our monthly meetings/talks? Interested in helping out on the night? We need people to help set up the projector/laptop/microphone and take it all down after the meetings, to staff the entry table, and to generally help out. You don't have to commit to doing it every time – but we need more people to ensure that we have a big enough pool so that we don't fall short on any given night. Contact secretary@ventnorheritage.org.uk if interested. We need your help!

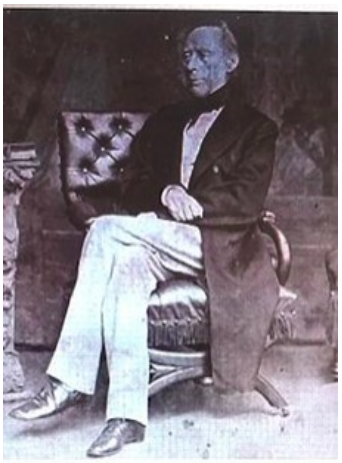
Upcoming meetings include:

31 Jul 2026	Andy Butler & Alan Clark "Ventnor & the Undercliff: The Early Years, Part II".
August	No meeting
25 Sep 2026	Speaker to be confirmed

All meetings are held at 7:30pm at the Yarborough Masonic Hall on Grove Road.

ST CATHERINE'S HOME AND SCHOOL

Apologies again to those people who attended the talk in April when the slides could not be properly shown due to technical glitches. As promised, here are a number of the photos from the talk on the history of the home/school.



James Clark, c. 1863

James Clark became one of Queen Victoria's doctors. He was a major force in raising the profile of the Ventnor climate as beneficial for those with breathing problems. This contributed to a quick expansion of the population. Eventually the Royal National Hospital opened for the treatment of those with TB. St Catherine's Church spearheaded a movement that would raise funds for the opening of a similar place but it would cater for the less rich.



St Catherine's Home was named in 1879 and was run by nuns from East Grinstead. It became very well known for the work it carried out for those with breathing problems. Many came from the heavily polluted areas of industrial Britain.



The Home ran successfully for many years, and then in 1908 Sister Kathleen joined the staff. She was 35 years old and had been working previously in St Thomas's Hospital in London. By 1910 she had been appointed manager, and had an ambition to extend the care to include children with asthma and under-nourishment.

1873–1966

'In loving memory of Sister Kathleen who served this home from 1910–66'.

Chapel font inscription

She was described as having a clear vision, warm compassion and a business acumen. It was also said that: 'Her word was law'. She would remain at the home until her death in 1966.

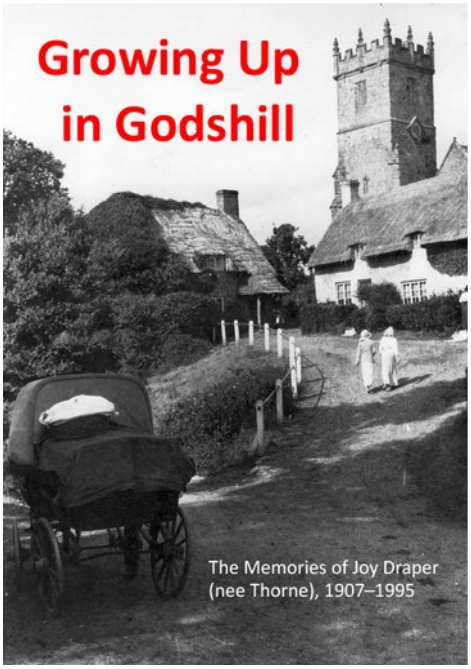
The Home, in 1915, became a residential school for the medical care and schooling of twenty children. With its increasing success and growing reputation the size of the school expanded along Grove Road.

It survived two world wars, with Rene Howe writing about the time towards the end of the last war when she was out in the Hermitage with some pupils, who were placed there to avoid any bombing. One night she was told by a local that many aircraft and boats were in the vicinity and she could expect a German invasion overnight. An undoubtedly disturbed night was followed next day by the news of D Day!

In 1977 a speech and language therapy unit was opened for 5 to 13 year olds. In 1979 there came centenary celebrations with a royal visit by the Duchess of Gloucester. The School, as it was now known, became famous for its skills and achievements. Today it works with people up to their early twenties and delivers a range of educational qualifications. Truly, a special place.



UPCOMING PUBLICATIONS



Mick's book on St Catherine's Home / School, upon which his April talk was based, is on track to come out later this summer. Before that, however, as mentioned in the previous newsletter, the Society's next publication will, we hope, come out before the end of July. *Growing Up in Godshill: The Memories of Joy Draper (nee Thorne), 1907–1995* will sell for £6 (plus postage and packing if bought from the online shop), and will be announced to the membership by e-mail. Copies should be available for purchase at the July meeting.

VENTNOR FRINGE

The VDLHS isn't directly involved in any Fringe events this year, but there are a couple of events that might be of particular interest to members.

On Holiday With Herzen

Ingrams Yard, Thurday 23 July, 1pm.

> What if the fate of modern Russia could be traced back to a quiet Victorian seaside town? On Holiday with Herzen: How Russia Could Have Been Different is a witty and thought-provoking new play from Jonas Golland and Bob Prophette, premiering at the 2026 Ventnor Fringe. Blending history, literature, and dry humour, the play uncovers Ventnor's surprising place at the heart of 19th-century Russian intellectual life.

It Just So Happened - An Alternative History Show

Bosco Theatre @ Fringe Village, Ventnor Park, Wedneday 22 July, 2:30pm.

> Multi award-winning stand-up comedian Richard Pulsford (former Scottish Comedian of the Year runner-up and UK Pun Championships winner) hosts this show for history fans. 3 guest comedians / history buffs perform short stand-up sets based 'on this day' in history before they explore some of the real and imagined history of the Ventnor and surrounding area's people and events. Recorded for podcast.

Details are available at vfringe.co.uk or from Ventnor Exchange for those who prefer to book in person or would like to ask any questions, open every day.

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. We’ll be presenting the questions over the course of several newsletters so people who didn’t make it on the night can have a go. In the April newsletter we started the ten questions from round one, and now we present round two, the picture round. Can you identify these ten pictures?



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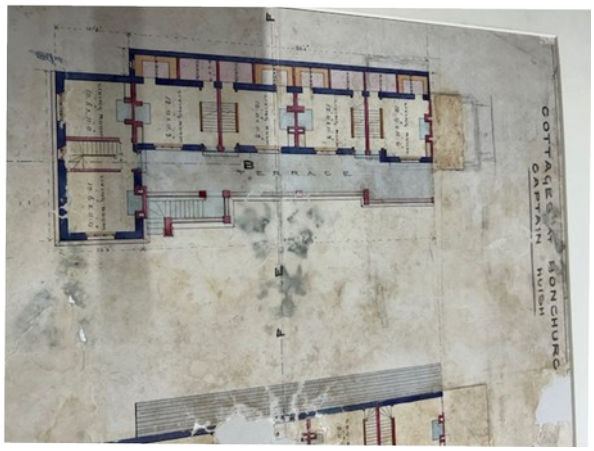

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STORIES OF OLD VENTNOR

In January 1967 a 21 year old woman from Newport, was praised for foiling an attempted robbery in London. She was chased by two men, but just managed to get the £500 she was carrying from the bank, to safety in the employment agency where she worked. The woman, Miss Sandra McCauley said later that she recognised the men – they had been at the office the previous week, asking questions.



The picture here is of Mrs Mollie Pike, original Mollie Coleman of Ventnor. She was being invited, at major events, to judge the breed of Old English Sheepdog. She was a nationally known and successful breeder and exhibitor.

The dog is Sweet Caroline, a top show dog and winner of over 100 prizes, including 12 at Crufts. In the summer the dogs collected money for the Guide Dogs for the Blind charity.

Still in 1967, the Mercury wrote of the state of the grounds of the old National Hospital. The building itself was empty but still standing. However, the grounds were overgrown with five trees having fallen across the boundary wall of the Steephill cricket ground. More had blown down in front of the old building. The newspaper finished the article by praising the hospital staff for having contributed in a major way to the lives of patients and to the virtual end of TB as a killer in the UK.

QUIZ ANSWERS

1. Finial from the top of the Salvation Army Hall on Victoria Street. The hall was damaged by a bomb during the Second World War and later torn down. The finial was discovered in the rubble during the building of the block of houses on Albert Street known as Acorn Rise – now you know where the name came from!

2. Detail of the wrought ironwork on the bandstand in Ventnor Park (originally on the pier) – removed during the First World War for the war effort.

3. This was the field east of Bonchurch Old Church, below East Dene. There probably wasn't a Roman camp here; Victorian antiquarians misinterpreted some earthworks. In any case, they've since fallen into the sea.

4. Milanese Villa (La Falaise) on the Western Cliff, where the car park is now.

5. A nineteenth-century illustration of a mediaeval legend of St Boniface chopping down a sacred pagan oak tree – some people think this story is where the idea of the Christmas tree comes from. (Spoiler: it probably isn't).

6. Olivia Parkes (Britannia) at her cabin.

7. Detail of a stained glass window originally in the chapel of the Royal National Hospital, and removed to St Lawrence Church after the hospital was demolished.

8. Original architect's plans for Huish Terrace on Mitchell Avenue. The label placing it in Bonchurch is a mistake.

9. St Catherine's Church. The viewpoint is from the upstairs window of one of the cottages opposite St Catherine's School, but before the school was built – the main school building blocks the view today. The drawing is by a Hungarian artist, wife of an exiled revolutionary.

10. Plaque on no. 15 The High Street (now Parsons Popculture). How many people pass this way every day and never notice it?