

Ventnor History

Ventnor

Ventnor is essentially a Victorian town, dating from the 1830's, built on the site of a tiny hamlet of scattered houses whose inhabitants were fishermen or connected with some seafaring occupation. Some may well have been involved in smuggling which had for many years been common practice on the southern coast of the Island.

An entry of 1795 calls Ventnor a small village between Steephill and Bonchurch and refers to the cove with its cascade and fine scenery. A stream which drove the wheel of the local mill flowed into the cascade. The village was noted for its catches of crab and lobster which supplied the London market.

Early History

The area on which Ventnor now stands was part of the manor of Holeway. This name referring to the district appears in several early documents, the first being in 1263 (Henry III). This mentions a certain Roger de Hinton of Holeweye. In 1280 (Edward I) Isabella de Fortibus claimed holdings in the manors of Rewe, Bonchurch and Holeweye. A decree of 1346 (Edward III) stated that the 'tenths' of Wroxall and Holeway were denoted as belonging to the priory church of Carisbrooke, and a deed of John del Isle dated 1358 (Edward III) refers to the ancient manor and tithes of Holeway and gives the position of the manor as next to Bonchurch. In 1408 (Henry IV) an account of the holdings of John Lysle states at the time of his death he owned the manors of Shanklin and Holeway. Finally at a court case at Newchurch in 1617 (James I) the manors of Bonchurch, Loucomb and Holloway are referred to, and there is also the first reference to 'Vintner' which has led to speculation that the town's name has some connection with the wine trade.

The 16th Century saw two occasions when the Ventnor area was at the forefront of affairs when the nation was at war. In 1545 a small French force landed at Bonchurch and penetrated some way into the village before being repelled. Some forty-three years later the enemy was Spain, and in July 1588 there was a widespread belief that troops from the Armada would attempt to land and occupy the Island. Fortunately this did not occur, but a heavy engagement took place off the southern coast before Howard, Drake and Hawkins drove the Spaniards eastwards away from the area and a possible port or anchorage.

In the early 18th Century, Ventnor was owned by the Pophain family who also had connections with Steephill and Bonchurch. Apart from the few buildings already mentioned, Ventnor at that time consisted of two farms totalling some 320 acres plus an area of 5 acres around the mill. The farms were known as Littleton Farm and Ventnor Farm.

Littleton Farm was the larger of the two with land bordering in the east on Bonchurch, in the north along the top of the downs, and stretching into the west to a small field known as Four Linches next to Steephill. Two early houses are mentioned as part of the farm. In 1781 St. Boniface House (site at the foot of hill on Leeson Road) is stated as being in the ownership of a Colonel Hill and the New Inn (now Hillside, Mitchell Avenue) in the ownership of a Mrs. Groves.

Ventnor Farm also bordered Steephill and contained most of what is now the western side of the town. The farmhouse, which can be seen near St. Catherine's Church, was owned by Mr. Thomas Cooyd, followed by Farmer Drudge and Mr. Way. Later Lady Frances Tollemarche of the Dysart family lived there, and then it passed to a Mr. Hadfield. Following his ownership the house was rebuilt in its present form.

It is thought that the mill could well have been in existence for several centuries, if the reference in a Feudal Aid account of 1327 (Edward III) means the building which was at Ventnor. A certain 'Geoffrey atte Mill' is named in the account for the 'Vilata de Wathe' (Undercliff).

The mill was situated at the top of a small waterfall (near modern Winter Gardens) and was driven by a stream which flowed from St. Boniface Down into the waterfall and on into the sea. Writers made constant reference to the romantic scenery of this part of the coast. In 1813 the following was written about Ventnor - "The most picturesque spot along the coast; the smallest of small villages, consisting of a group of low thatched huts along the shore, and an old mill perched on a crag high above the beach on which the stream which turned it dashed in a picturesque cascade towards the sea."

In the same account is a reference to the 'Crab and Lobster' Inn (King Charles I Hotel). It states that - "A little wayside inn, still known as the 'Crab and Lobster,' with one or two lodging houses, was for thirty years since the chief attraction for visitors." The age of the inn is uncertain but it is thought to be the oldest licensed house on the Island. Situated near Spring Hill, the property was bought by a Mr. Mew in 1793, and he replaced the thatched roof with one of slate. An annual 'Crab Fair' was held at the inn in early May for trading and games, but it fell from favour in 1846. A revival of the Fair in modern times takes place annually at Whitsun. There is speculation that Charles I visited the inn when he was at Carisbrooke, and this is the reason why the present hotel now bears his name.

Modern Ventnor

Up to 1830 the village was isolated from the rest of the Island by the high downs, and the only communication was by rough cart tracks which served as roads. A road from the west came in from St. Lawrence, through Steephill, past Ventnor Farm to Spring Hill where it met a road coming in from Bonchurch. This junction was then the beginning of a road leading north over the downs to Wroxall.

References to the amenable climate and the possible benefits to health had occurred from the beginning of the 19th Century, and St. Boniface House had been occupied by people seeking these benefits. About 1830 interest in the area increased. In the previous year a Dr. Lempriere had talked of the "striking advantage of the Undercliff climate," and refers to gentlemen's houses for letting and land for building. Fifty years before, Sir Richard Worsley had given the population of Ventnor as 77 persons, and it appears to have changed little until the 1830 period. However, as the potential of the area as a resort began to dawn, the situation altered. In 1830 Sir Andrew Crawford made reference to the fine building land between St. Lawrence and Steephill where "Mr. Hambrough is building a beautiful castle," and to three new houses in Spring Hill. William Wilberforce occupied St. Boniface House in 1832 and 1833 and enthused over the country walks, scenery and shelter from the cold winds. He wrote: "It really was an oasis in the desert."

In the late 1820's John Hambrough of Middlesex bought the Steephill Estate and began the construction of Steephil Castle (site and remains in Undercliff Gardens). In order to carry this out, he demolished the summer residence which had been used by a former Governor of the Isle of Wight, but

the small summer house belonging to this residence can still be seen alongside the huge projecting rock known as 'Devil's Bridge' which featured in Tomkins' prints of the 1790's (Little Pax in Castle Close).

Hambrough's mason rented a plot in the new Belgrave Road and built Cove Cottage (1828) beginning a building boom in the district. When Sir James Clark's book on the beneficial effects of the Ventnor climate was published, further housing development took place. St. Catherine's Church (1837) was built as were the parochial schools; both being endowed by John Hambrough.

St. Catherine's was not the first church to appear in the town. In 1836 the Congregational Church was built in response to a demand for a local place of worship. The site of this building was in what is now the main car park in High Street, but the last of several churches to be erected there was demolished in 1986. At the time the two churches were built in the 1830's, Ventnor was still part of the old parish of Newchurch, necessitating a journey of six or seven miles to the parish church, but in 1867 this situation was remedied and the new Ventnor parish was constituted.

Although the town grew rapidly there was no overall planning. Land was sold piecemeal and houses were erected haphazardly. One writer in 1842 described Ventnor as "A most irregular, straggling, unpaved, unlighted, dull and ill-supplied village." He was advocating the building of a pier to improve communications by sea and bring more custom to a place which had some of the finest bathing in England. However, some road improvements took place near Hillside and Zig-Zag Road was completed.

The following year saw an important meeting at the Ventnor Hotel (Royal Hotel). Householders and residents expressed concern about the state of the town and the lack of accommodation for visitors, but a Bill presented to Parliament outlining improvements failed to gain support, and progress was retarded. In spite of this, work went forward on the Esplanade which was completed in 1847.

At this time a newspaper called the 'Ventnor Diamond' was issued, price 2d., and in its columns there was talk of the Ventnor Gas Company and of hope of improvement to the local postal services which were conducted through a branch office of the main centre at Newport.

By 1851 the population of the town had risen to nearly 3000 and its popularity as a resort was increasing judging by the number of people travelling from Ryde to Ventnor by private carriage and by public transport in coaches and horse omnibuses. Agitation to bring railways to the Island was quickly scotched by powerful landowners who followed the tactics adopted by the gentry on the mainland. On December 7th 1852 a meeting was held at Newport where the Earl of Yarborough, and John Hambrough and his son led the opposition to any idea of allowing railways to be built. They were strongly supported by 'other influential gentlemen.' Although a Bill reached Parliament it failed to gain support, and rail building was delayed for a decade.

However, in 1860 a Bill allowing the building of the Isle of Wight Railway from Ryde to Ventnor was passed. By 1864 the line had reached Shanklin via Brading and Sandown, but access to Ventnor caused problems. Landowners objected successfully to the line being brought in through Luccombe and Bonchurch, and in retrospect this was almost certainly beneficial, judging by the number of landslips in that area. Eventually a decision was reached to come into Ventnor from the north through Wroxall, necessitating the construction of a 1312 yard tunnel through St. Boniface Down. Despite delays the project was completed in 1866 and Ventnor had its first station in Mitchell Avenue (now the Industrial Estate).

While this building was going ahead, plans were proposed in 1863 for a harbour and pier to cost £20,000, which, like all projects of this nature, escalated to £50,000 before completion. Steamers came in, particularly from Littlehampton, landing passengers and goods, but poor construction was quickly exposed and the harbour fell victim to the sea. This caused problems along the shore because to build the harbour, a protective promontory known as Collins Point had been removed, and much of the beach shingle had been swept away by the action of the tides. A second pier was built but was again destroyed in a winter storm in 1881. Finally the local authority took over the project and the new pier, the Royal Victoria Pier, was constructed.

In 1888 the Ventnor and Southsea Steam Packet Company ran ships to the pier during summer, and this was followed by further routes which meant that the town was now well served by both rail and sea connections.

In 1900, another railway, the last section on the Island, was built into Ventnor from the west via Whitwell and St. Lawrence. Ventnor's second terminus (Westhaven in Castle Close) was constructed in the grounds of Steephil Castle near the junction of Castle Road and Park Avenue. This line burst into the Undercliff through High Hat Tunnel near St. Lawrence, giving passengers the most spectacular views of the English Channel along what must have been one of the most picturesque stretches of railway in the whole of Britain. Road communications were further improved when the road was completed along the clifftops from Ventnor to Whitwell in 1892.

The beneficial effects of the Ventnor climate from the health point of view have already been mentioned, and in the 1860's this was reinforced by the building of the Royal National Hospital for the treatment of chest diseases at Steephil (Botanic Gardens). Following the Public Health Act of 1875 improvements were made to drainage, water supply and sanitation, and this was safeguarded in 1894 when Lowtherville, or Upper Ventnor, was drawn into the town and the water and drainage supply were extended to this area. The installation of the first electricity service helped to modernise the town further, and by the turn of the century the population was approaching the 6000 mark.

During the Edwardian period prior to the First World War, the town reached its height as a resort and as an attractive place in which to live, particularly for those in retirement. Ventnor Park, laid out on land which had been purchased from the Steephil Estate, was maturing, and the remodelling of the cascade area produced the wonderful feature which can be seen today. A further proposed development was for a funicular railway to run from near the pierhead up to Church Street, but this, and other similar plans, never reached fruition.

In the holiday period hotels were full and the esplanade and beach were packed with people using the bathing machines or listening to German bands which were a feature of pre-World War 1 days. Watching the activity at sea was a popular pastime, and in April 1912 those who saw the 'Titanic' sail by on her maiden voyage could never have realised the fate which awaited her and her passengers.

Between the Wars, people from all walks of life continued to be attracted to the town for holidays, and train, bus and steamer services worked at full stretch during the summer months. Some who came compared Ventnor with Madeira or Amalfi with its unique position in the Undercliff and the backdrop of the downs. The constant need to entertain these visitors was further catered for when the Winter Gardens Pavilion was opened in 1936.

However, in 1939 the atmosphere of the town changed abruptly when it became part of Britain's front line, this time against the Germans. When France fell in 1940, enemy forces were only 70 miles away

across the Channel. A radar station on top of St. Boniface Down was a constant target for German aircraft and Ventnor suffered quite extensive damage and several casualties.

Since 1945 Ventnor has undergone great changes along with other resorts which have had to compete with cheap foreign holidays. Many who used to come for a summer holiday now fly to the Mediterranean, and although the motor car and coach still bring in visitors, and roads in the area have been improved, the effect on rail travel has been disastrous. Both railway lines have been closed, the first into Ventnor West in 1952, and the main line to the town in 1966 despite tremendous opposition.

Another great change has been the disappearance of the Royal National Hospital which was demolished in the 1960's to be replaced by the renowned Botanic Gardens and Smuggling Museum. At the same time Steephill Castle also made way for a modern housing estate. A further sad loss occurred in 1985 when the local 'Isle of Wight Mercury' newspaper was forced to close down after over a century of publication. In May 1988, another newspaper - the 'Ventnor Mercury' was welcomed by residents.