

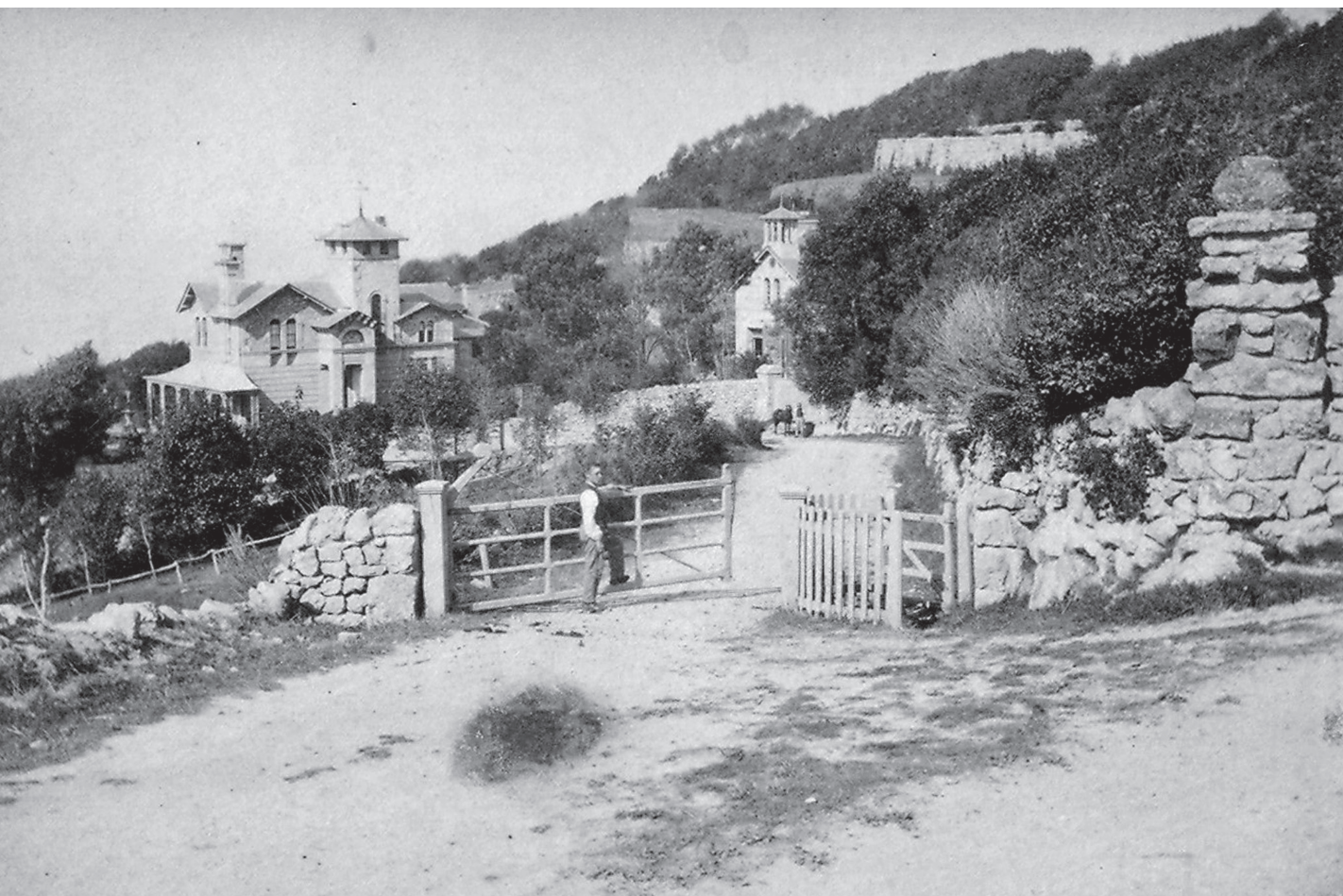
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November 2017

VICTORIANS IN SEARCH
OF WINTER HEALTH



South View House, situated in the portion of the Undercliff coast between Niton and Blackgang, some four miles west of Ventnor. The photograph is from a carte-de-visite, probably taken around the late 1860s. These were highly fashionable at the time. On arrival in the Undercliff, new visitors announced their presence by sending out these cards, prior to formal introductions. South View conforms to the design of a classic Italian villa, complete with coach house and stables to match. It was an architectural style that was replicated many times over, evoking the sense that here were shades of the Mediterranean on an English shore.

VICTORIANS IN SEARCH
OF WINTER HEALTH:

*VENTNOR, ISLE OF WIGHT:
THE MEDITERRANEAN ON
AN ENGLISH SHORE*

MICHAEL FREEMAN



CROSS PUBLISHING, CHALE, ISLE OF WIGHT

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Ventnor Cove by Thomas Barber. The date is about 1830 when it was home to a few fishermen's families and to occasional visitors attracted by the picturesque and sublime coastal scenery

INTRODUCTION

This book explores the way a remote and tiny fishing hamlet on the far south coast of England was transformed over a few decades of the nineteenth century into a kind of outpost of London's West End. Ventnor in the Isle of Wight was largely the creation of a string of London capitalist investors and entrepreneurs who engaged in a frenzy of land purchase and building following the recommendation of a distinguished physician that its winter climate was perfect for pulmonary invalids. Just as in British India, the colonial élites retreated from the hot plains of summer to the hill stations flanking the Himalayas, so chesty invalids from among social élites at home, young as well as old, retreated to the Isle of Wight Undercliff to evade the cold, the wet and the smoky gloom of winter in the capital or in one of the cities of the industrial midlands or north. Ventnor became, by repute, England's Nice, a piece of the Mediterranean on English soil. Its best hotels and villas eventually vied with any to be found along the Promenade des Anglais on Nice's shore. The town had ladies' outfitters that dealt in the latest and best West End styles. You could buy Sèvres porcelain and Dresden china. Italian warehousemen offered stocks of high-class groceries. You could have liveries made for your servants. There were mercers selling expensive draperies to bring social distinction to drawing rooms and parlours. You could hire pianos and take drawing classes. And all of this was achieved at breakneck speed such that, by mid-century, Ventnor was among Britain's premier winter health resorts, sought out not only by populations at home but also by populations overseas. The entire story is portrayed in astonishing detail in the pages of the *Times* newspaper. Year after year, week after week, Ventnor and the Undercliff figures in its pages. The newspaper became its window to the world. Or, at least, to the well-to-do classes who, when sick in body, looked to the resort's winter sun and air to make amends.



Ventnor Esplanade looking west around 1880. It is a sunny day in late spring or early summer, near the end of the resort's winter season. The four-storey Queen's Hotel has not long been opened. To its right is the much older Esplanade Hotel, looking every inch the mediterranean hostelry with its distinctive stone loggia, first-floor verandah and courtyard garden.

CHAPTER ONE

A RESORT IS BORN

I am now reading the *Times* newspaper. It is for the year 1878. But I am not in a library poring over yellowing pages of the famous London broadsheet. Nor am I peering increasingly boss-eyed at a microfilm reader. Instead, I am sitting in the comfort of my study gazing at the pages of the newspaper on my laptop. By one of the wonders of early twenty-first century technology, I can re-enter and recover an otherwise lost life-world. Key in Ventnor as the search term and a whole raft of entries turn up. For the year 1878, there are 227 of them. Over the three years 1877-9, the total was 536. As early as 1844, there were 26 entries for the year. They record anything from the beginning and end of individual lives to adjudications over bankruptcy and the dissolution of business partnerships. They advertise properties for sale and for rent, with the salubrity of the Ventnor air set alongside descriptions of rooms for habitation, the range of domestic offices and the garden grounds. Sometimes it is not individual homes that are being advertised but strings of leasehold ground rents, affording to any purchaser a lucrative annual income with little in the way of responsibilities. In other cases, the sale of building plots is the subject, investors and speculators pressed to lose no time in capitalising on the opportunities of 'so rising a resort'.

Ventnor is positioned on the south-eastern shore of the Isle of Wight, set some 10 or so miles out into the English Channel from the mainland coast. Its population by the late 19th century had grown to around 6,000 people according to most authorities. Even accommodating the populations of the adjacent villages of Bonchurch and St. Lawrence, it still could not claim to be anything other than a small town. So how was it that a settlement of such relatively small scale came to figure so prominently in the pages of the country's leading national newspaper? There are clues to be had in quite a lot of the newspaper entries themselves: Ventnor (and the Undercliff more widely) was increasingly perceived, especially from the 1830s, as enjoying a climate beneficial to human health. This applied particularly in the winter season which ran from October through to April or May. In an age when consumption (tuberculosis) was a primary cause of death, notably among younger generations, it became a magnet for sufferers. It also attracted older generations struggling with bronchial complaints. However, these were



Southgrove Terrace, an elegant suite of lodging houses, in an elevated position facing the sea.

largely all people from relatively well-off or well-to-do backgrounds. What they sought in Ventnor was not just an equable winter climate, away from the soot and smoke of cities and large towns, but accommodations that matched the homes from whence they came. All manner of hotels, villas and lodging houses were thus erected as urban property speculators and builders registered the opportunities for income and profits that the area seemed to promise. It was in the pages of the *Times* that they came to public view.

With the influx of well-to-do visitors, some of whom effectively became part residents, the provision of suitable shops and services became vital. So, gradually, Ventnor's high streets began taking on shades of London's West End. Here, too, was another investor's paradise, evidenced in the rather grand lines of two, three and even four-storey buildings that in due course came to line High Street and Mill (later Pier) Street. Separate living accommodation above the shop premises ensured that *rentier* investors could maintain incomes as trading conditions responded to the familiar downturns of the business cycle. Even then, the *Times* newspaper remained a place where Ventnor's traders sought to dispose of their leases, plainly in



Two elegant facades on Ventnor High Street. Wicker was a letting agent for rooms and apartments. Immediately next door is a bank, while the fine building on the right is 15, High Street, later the Home and Colonial Stores

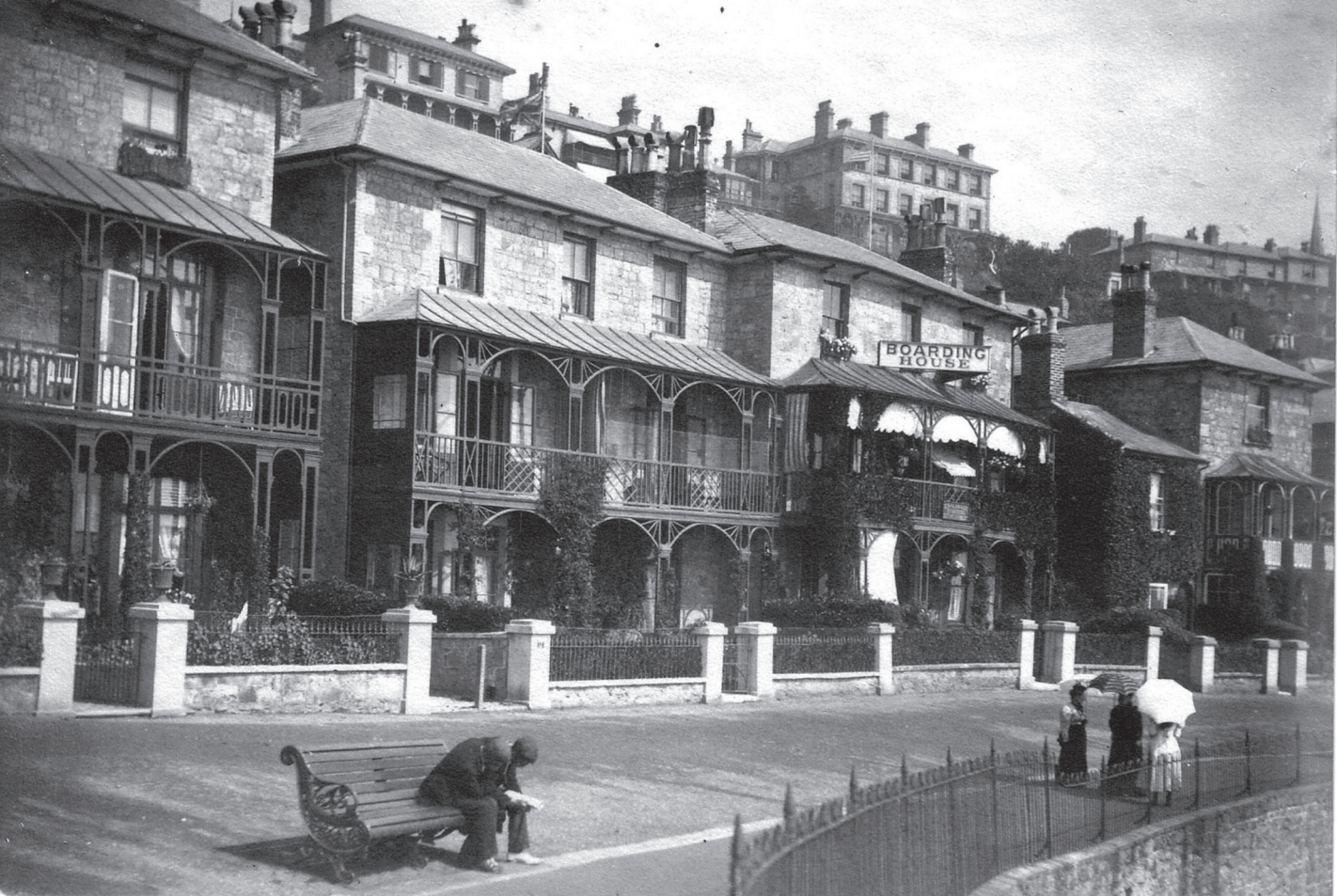
the hope of attracting interest from West End storekeepers, the ones likely to be best attuned to the preferences and tastes of Ventnor's particular class of consumers.

It is, of course, a perennial difficulty of all nineteenth-century resort towns, whether they are construed as spas, watering places or places specifically of winter retreat, to derive accurate counts of population. British census enumerations were done in the month of April, so summer resorts, full with vast numbers of weekly boarders, escaped counting. As Ventnor was primarily a winter resort, however, April was a time when some visitors would have remained, and they are recorded in their hundreds on the pages of the censuses, variously described as boarders or visitors, or, in cases where they stayed in sanatoria, as patients. One can discover streets in the town where house after house has the household head given as a lodging house or boarding house

keeper. Some had few lodgers and boarders relative to the number of rooms recorded and, occasionally, there were whole houses recorded as uninhabited on the census night. However, in a report of the 1871 Census in the *Times* newspaper of 24th April 1871, it was stated that Ventnor had only 12 houses uninhabited on census night and most of these were in fact in occupation as they were all furnished to receive seasonal visitors and they just happened not to have anyone sleeping there on the day the enumerator called.

So the picture that the Census presents of the size of Ventnor's resident population is probably not that inaccurate, the more so since enumerators described significant numbers of a category of much more permanent residents; individuals described as 'living on own means'. These were people supported on small annuities in the fashion of the widows and spinsters of Elizabeth Gaskell's famous Cranford. They settled in Ventnor for the society it offered as well as the benefits for longevity that its climate appeared to afford. Some had more substantial incomes deriving from property and ground rents. Others drew their income from company dividends or from the yield on Consols in the fashion of some of the more elderly members of the Forsyte clan in Galsworthy's famous family saga. Those living on their own means tended to be found in streets that did not enjoy the best views over Ventnor Bay. They were also slightly further from key amenities. But all were generally distinct from the homes of the poorer, working population. In a quarter east of the town centre and south of the High Street were the many artisans, apprentices, laundresses, seamstresses, carters, porters and errand boys that were vital for providing services to their better-off neighbours and to the resort's visitors. And it is in Ventnor's visitor population that we find our way back to the plethora of Ventnor's entries in the *Times*. There may have been slightly more than 6,000 regular inhabitants but what the Census inevitably misses is the turnover rate of the town's visiting population. A lodging house with, say, four letting sets of apartments would have been host to more than that number of families or sets of visitors over a season. Rooms or apartments were regularly advertised as being let by the week as well as by the month. People came to convalesce over almost infinitely variable timespans. So we can readily conclude that many hundreds more people (perhaps even thousands) became part of Ventnor's population and it was through the pages of the *Times* newspaper that they found a conduit of continuing knowledge about the resort.¹

¹T. Linn, *The Health Resorts of Europe* (London, 11th ed., 1904) gives the number of visitors to Ventnor as 6,000. The source of this figure is not given. It probably relates to the winter season and it probably records the visitor capacity at any one time rather than the number of visitors who came.



St. Vincent's Villa, Richmond Villa, Belinda Boarding House and St. Martin's, at the western end of Ventnor Esplanade, each replete with two storeys of verandahs and accessed by numerous sets of twin french doors.

It was for this reason, too, that events at Ventnor and in the surrounding Undercliff came to be regularly reported in the *Times*. Royal visits (and they were surprisingly frequent) invariably gained significant column space. But it was often from Ventnor that local reports of sailing regattas off the Island came, or the movement of naval vessels on exercise. The close passage of Brunel's Great Eastern off Ventnor on the Atlantic Telegraph Expedition in early July 1866 was a major feature: those on board claimed that almost every house could be distinguished. It was not long before this traffic in news was supplemented by some of Ventnor's cannier business community. Lodging house keepers and others would write to the newspaper editor to remark on the particular variety of flowers in bloom on a December day, evidence of its propitious winter climate. The more scientifically-minded would parade readers with parallel meteorological observations. Even the town clerk registered the facility of the newspaper in widening the range and number of potential visitors. On 31st December 1888, he placed a box advert about Ventnor as a WINTER HEALTH RESORT. It recorded that in the week ending December 8th, the mean air temperature had been 51.2F. A month or

so later, on February 4th 1889, a further advert remarked that there had been bright sun on 26 days during that December, with a mean air temperature at 3 pm of 47.7F. One visitor to Ventnor, staying at the Esplanade Hotel in late December 1891, observed to readers that whilst much of the country had been suffering from 'Egyptian darkness', enveloped in thick fog and severe frost, the resort's visitors were in the 'land of Goshen', sitting out of doors, windows wide open, bathed in brilliant sunshine.²

It was a common quip at the height of Ventnor's building boom in mid-century that the place had become a kind of 'Mayfair-by-the-sea', such was the cost of its building plots, its land and building leases and some of its visitor accommodations (especially in season). The appellation was accorded further credence by virtue of the way London capital underpinned much of Ventnor's expansion. London land and property agents had an almost constant stream of business with the town and its environs. London investors and speculators were some of their most regular clients. So the scale of Ventnor's entries in the *Times* (sometimes almost daily) over much of the Victorian age was no fanciful journalist copy. Rather the town floated on a raft of relative wealth and social respectability that had almost colonial overtones. Indeed, it became a place of retirement or temporary rest for not a few former members of the Indian Army and the Indian Civil Service. It offered to them reminders of warmer climes, as will later be seen.

²Egyptian darkness – the reference in Exodus to darkness so thick that it can be felt; the Land of Goshen was named in the Bible as the place in Egypt given to the Hebrews by the Pharaoh

A RESORT IS BORN



In the early 1880's, a handsome row of shops was erected on the west side of Victoria Street. It was given the name 'Cheapside', another reminder of Ventnor's association with London wealth. Note the elegant glass lanterns outside the shop on the left. Illumination of this kind was also found on premises along High Street.

VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH



Drawn by P. Dewint.

*Scene on the Beach at Ventnor.
London. Published July 1. 1816 by J. Murray*

W. B. Cooke fecit.

Ventnor Bay by Peter Dewint, as engraved in 1816

CHAPTER TWO

SHADES OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

On 26th February 1890, the *Times* newspaper carried two adverts from Farebrother, Killis, Clark & Co., property agents of Fleet Street, the two entries placed one above the other. The uppermost announced the sale of a charming Ventnor residence 'in the Swiss-Italian style (built on arches)'. The lower advert offered for sale or rent a villa in Sordello, between Milan and Lake Como. Both afforded ample family accommodation, usual domestic offices and pleasure grounds. Photographic views were available at the company's offices. This largely accidental juxtaposition offers to remind us of the way Ventnor, over some half a century, had become part of the English passion for the Mediterranean, though plainly not of it. Among higher social echelons, the autumn season had seen an increasing annual migration to southern Europe for the winter, drawn by the reputed therapeutic properties of mediterranean climates and under the press of distinguished physicians. In the foothills of the Pyrenees, along the coasts of the French-Italian Riviera, around the shores of the Italian Lakes, a whole array of fashionable winter resorts was born. For those with less stamina for the lengthy journey, however, or for those with less ample means, the English could find elements of the Mediterranean far closer to home. And Ventnor, by 1890, had acquired international distinction as just such a winter resort.³

Ventnor's mediterranean credentials had been first publicly voiced by the physician James Clark⁴ as early as 1830 when he remarked on the transition in climate as the traveller descended from the high downs above the Island's south-eastern shores and entered the region known by then as the Undercliff. The sharp downland air gave way to a much more genial atmosphere in which tree and flower displayed a striking luxuriance. Clark compared it to descending from the wild passes of the Simplon in the Swiss

³In May 1898, two Australian visitors to the Clarendon Boarding House in Ventnor described the local scenery as more beautiful than any they had seen elsewhere, not even excepting the Italian and French Riviera.

⁴Later Sir James Clark, and a physician to Queen Victoria. His book, *The Influence of Climate in the Prevention and Cure of Chronic Disease* was first published in London in 1829, by John Churchill. Ventnor figures first in the 2nd edition published in 1830

St. Boniface Villa in a photograph from the later 1860s. It was built as a hotel in the early 1840s, positioned at the easternmost end of the High Street and set in substantial grounds.



St. Boniface Villa is the tall building on the left. Nine Stones was located on the elevated terrace to the right. The engraving dates from the mid-1840s.

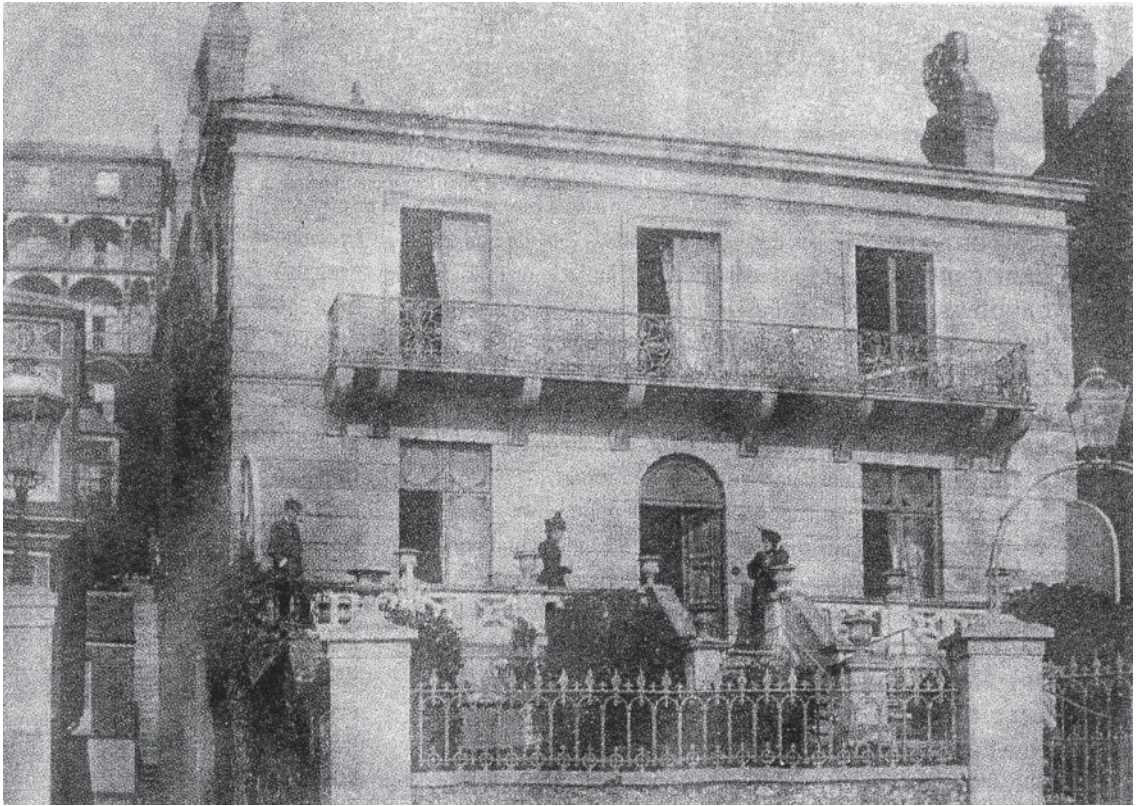
Alps into the valley of Domo d'Ossola; and many subsequent observers agreed with him. On a fine day, you can re-live the experience today by descending one of the paths from Bonchurch Down and then taking the steep, winding shute that leads down to Bonchurch village. Even during colder months, you can see exotic plants flourishing in the open air and, on a sunny day, the balmy warmth in more sheltered spots has every semblance of a mediterranean shore.

It was not long before Clark's encomium began to figure in the *Times*. In October 1836, Upper Mount Cottage, in Bonchurch, was offered as a desirable winter residence for consumptives as recommended by Dr. Clark in his work on climate and disease. In December 1838, an advertisement for lodgings for invalids at Ventnor, by the week or by the month, described the place as a desirable part of the Undercliff where the climate was mild in the winter and spring months. Another advert, in September 1843, concerning the sale of a 'capital VILLA RESIDENCE' at Bonchurch, observed that the property would be justly worth of attention by those who have resided in tropical climates. If this was rather stretching the truth about the character of the local micro-climate, a feature of Ventnor's early development that tended to play upon such descriptions was the style selected for many of its first villas. George Brannon, writing in about 1840-41, for example, described 'a first-rate hotel, of a rather novel appearance to the untraveled(sic) eye built strictly in imitation of the airy and picturesque style of the Italian villa'. This was St. Boniface Villa, located in a hollow below Nine Stones⁵ at the eastern end of the town.⁶

Alternatively, walk down to Ventnor's Esplanade today and you will see located immediately west of the Metropole the startlingly beautiful Villa Amanti. If the name was not indication enough, its Italianate style is unmistakable, whether in terms of the low hipped roofs, the principal rooms located on the first floor, in *piano nobile* form, and the sets of double doors opening out on to balconies at first and second floors. Gazing at it on a sunny morning, if you can blank out the structures on either side, you could be on the Genoese shore of the Mediterranean, the palm trees in its front courtyard and the other semi-arid plantings waving gently in the sea breeze. The building was erected around 1843-4 and conformed to exactly the sort of accommodation that James Clark had hoped would be provided in Ventnor and the Undercliff: detached dwellings set within garden grounds. From its balconies, visitors at Villa Amanti would have looked out upon an increasingly

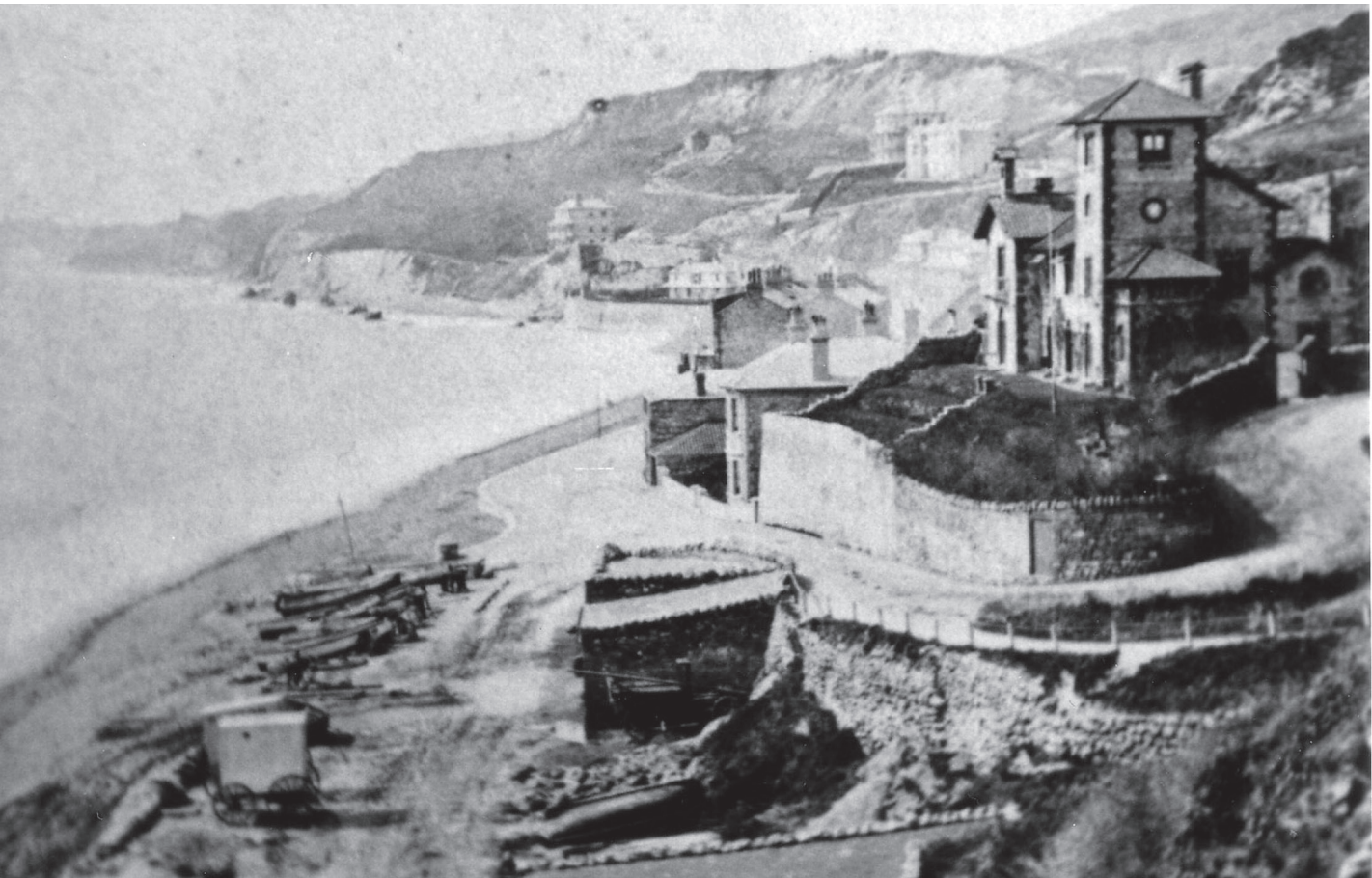
⁵Nine Stones marked a rock ledge a little to the west of the bottom of Leeson Hill.

⁶The building survives but in a drastically reduced form.



Villa Amanti in a late Victorian view. The building survives today, having been wonderfully restored, the one feature missing being the wrought iron gate arch surmounted by a glass lantern.

St. Augustine Villa, set on a rock ledge a little above the bay, in a view from the early 1860s



animated shore, for by 1848 the once isolated fishing cove had acquired a promenade for visitors, a scaled down version of the famous Promenade des Anglais at Nice. A.B. Granville, in his *Spas of England*, 1841, had already described Ventnor and Bonchurch as England's Nice, unhesitatingly a place of winter residence for consumptives and other invalids.

A little further east, on a rock ledge overlooking the Cascade (once a waterfall from the mill stream), is an altogether larger villa, erected at roughly the same date. More Swiss-Italianate in design, St. Augustine Villa might be a transplant from the shores of one of the Italian lakes. It commands extensive views over Ventnor Bay and, in time, became a landmark building, for ever identified with Ventnor as a rising resort. Over the nineteenth century, as well as host to invalids, it was frequented by all manner of writers and artists, including many from the European continent, among them Alexander Herzen, regarded by Lenin as the father of Russian socialism. Higher up on Ventnor's terraces are yet more early villa forms. Ascend Grove Road towards the vast sandstone quarry that eventually became the site of Ventnor's main railways station and one's eye is soon arrested by the sight of a sequence of regency villas, all detached and set within quite generous garden grounds. They might have been designed by John Nash such is the elegance and symmetry of their form. Although plainly not Italianate per se, the regency style was, of course, classically inspired and so the buildings offered yet more reminders of the Mediterranean in Ventnor's early growth.

There was, however, a growing impediment to the realization of James Clark's almost arcadian vision. The estate land upon which Ventnor had begun to grow was more and more sold off piecemeal and in smaller and smaller lots. Granville in 1840, quoting one informant visitor, described how land had too often been let in small portions to needy people who had run up cheap small houses for the sake of immediate gain. The consequence was that it was some while before there were adequate selections of properties that were really comfortable for invalids. This was perhaps an inevitable outcome given the way demand from investors and speculators grew. Land prices increased exceptionally quickly and Ventnor's terraces became steadily more crowded, some buildings erected on the most vertiginous of plots. Unfortunately, therefore, the iconic style represented by Villa Amanti rather faded from view. But what even the lowest of jobbing builders still came to provide was homage to the winter sun. For, almost without exception, every structure erected with a seaward view was embellished with some sort of verandah or balcony, or both, an area where visiting invalids could partake of sun and sea air on all but the most inclement of winter days. They gave to the resort a remarkable uniformity of vista when observed from a boat in Ventnor Bay or from the pier that by the late 1880s had become a major new promenade.



Ventnor Esplanade in the 1860s. Esplanade Road runs up to the immediate right. The building on the corner was known as Beach Cottage, while to its immediate left is Villa Amanti.

Even lodging houses that stood obliquely to the seashore were embellished in this way, as the remarkable side view of the buildings extending on the eastward side up Esplanade Road in the 1860s reveals. In early December 1879, a correspondent of the *Isle of Wight Advertiser* afforded an illustration of what winter visitors could experience. He described the weather in Ventnor during the preceding November. Although cold, it had been the finest on record for 40 years. There had been 17 days of bright sunshine, many of them near cloudless. A thermometer placed under a verandah with a southerly aspect rose to 75 degrees on one day and 73 degrees on another. Along Belgrave Road, in front of the Marine Hotel, temperatures were as enjoyable as in summer.

One of the elements that helped contribute to Ventnor's mediterranean claims was its location on an island in the English Channel. Islands, typically, are characterized by oceanic climates in which a cardinal distinguishing feature is the limited diurnal range of temperature. The seas get colder or warmer much more slowly than the land. This led some observers, including medical men, to regard Ventnor as bearing comparison not with the mediterranean resorts of northern Italy and southern France, but with the island of Madeira, for long a destination of winter resort for English consumptives, the place where Jane Eyre's estranged wealthy uncle had gone for the benefit of his health in Charlotte Brontë's famous novel. From almost the beginning of Ventnor's growth, one can find commentaries that refer to the climate of Ventnor (and the Undercliff) as approximating to that of the island of Madeira. By the last decades of the century, it was regularly labelled



Grove House, just west of St. Catherine's Church. The building survives today. The date is around the 1860s and this looks to be a summer picture, judging from the shadows.

'the English Madeira', or 'England's Madeira' in a host of local guides-books. None of the other south coast resorts like Torquay, Bournemouth or Hastings, for instance, could lay claim to such a comparison. It thus helped to single out Ventnor as affording something quite distinctive. And anyone who had visited Funchal, Madeira's capital, would have recognized the topographical parallels: the steeply ascending slopes, with buildings arranged along parallel terraces, looking across a wide bay. As early as September 1837, a City of London property agent, Shuttleworth & Sons, placed an auction notice in the *Times* newspaper for the sale of Grove House, Ventnor, located just west of St. Catherine's Church. After describing the spacious accommodation, it concluded with the remark that the air of Ventnor had been compared to that of the island of Madeira. Some four years later, the same property was again for sale, by order of bankruptcy assignees. And here, too, the air was

stated to 'assimilate' to that of Madeira. Likewise, in July 1851, an auction was announced in the *Times* of the Ventnor and Bonchurch estate, including St. Boniface House and Grounds, building sites, stone quarries and £800 of valuable ground rents 'amply secured on property in the flourishing and rising town of Ventnor, justly styled the Madeira of England'.

Dr. George Martin, a local physician, wrote a book on the climate, history and natural productions of the Undercliff in 1849. He had become an acute observer of the local climate in the context of his treatment of consumptives. Using ten years of meteorological observations, he concluded that the area possessed an equability of temperature that enabled it 'to take a prominent station in the list not only of British climates, but also among the more vaunted ones abroad'. The island of Madeira, he continued, was usually considered to be *the* type of equable climate. However, Martin observed that the Undercliff presented a superiority even over Madeira in mean daily ranges of temperature in winter months. Later in the century, another local physician, Dr. J.M. Williamson, wrote an account of Ventnor and the Undercliff in the treatment of chronic pulmonary disease. He drew attention to the common claim about the beneficial effects of the abundant ozone that was then thought to be found at seaside locations. He recalled a visitor who likened living at Ventnor to being moored 20 miles out at sea. Here again was the oceanic influence in Ventnor's climate. It was especially manifest in the statistics that Williamson had amassed on the diurnal range in temperature for the winter months (December to February): 7.10F against a 12-month mean of 9.18F, the whole calculation based on 40 years of observations.

When new winter visitors arriving in the town found not sunshine and balmy air, but cool, blustery and wet conditions, they could perhaps take some comfort from the names selected for some of the resort's dwelling houses and thoroughfares, names that were indicative of mediterranean climes. A speculative development of villas that ran south-eastward from the upper end of High Street became Madeira Road, adding to the various cottages and villas that were already so named. It was part of an area sometimes referred to as Madeira Vale or Madeira Valley. On the Esplanade, we have already remarked on the iconic Villa Amanti, as Italian as its structural form, although when translated as 'lovers' villa', it may not exactly have been the ambience that pulmonary invalids were seeking.⁷ Indeed, this may have been why, later in the Victorian era, the name was altered to Madeira Villa.⁸ A much

⁷There is a story that the building was erected by a wealthy Italian architect for the use of his mistress. Although unconfirmed, it would explain the choice of name.

⁸The name was altered again in the early twentieth century: it became Glenthorne



Vicenza Villa (lower right), circa 1855. The building to its left is Havelock Villa. The line of buildings on the cliff above is St. Boniface Terrace. All except Havelock are Italianate in general style, St. Boniface Terrace complete with loggias to the frontages. Vicenza Villa later became St. Wilfrid's Presbytery, part of St. Wilfrid's Roman Catholic church.

smaller building immediately westward was called Villa Benedetti, after the distinguished family of that name from the area of Italy once known as the Papal States. A little further east along the Esplanade was Florence Villa, as evocative a mediterranean allusion as one was likely to find. Much the same could be said of the Montpellier Hotel which was placed up for auction in June 1843 according to a notice in the *Times*. It was being sold owing to the ill-health of its proprietor. The hotel was once known as the New Inn and today

9. It was later to become St. Wilfrid's Presbytery



The High Street under a light fall of snow early one winter morning when the milk was on the round. The view looks eastward, with Spring Hill running off on the left. The date is just after the First World War, but the scene would have been much the same several decades before.

is called Hillside, located at the bottom of Mitchell Avenue. Another *Times* advertisement, for late October 1854, gave details of Vicenza Villa, standing on ground near the future site of St. Wilfrid's Roman Catholic Church. Vicenza was the town in the Venetian Plain famous for the architecture of Palladio. The villa was originally a lodging house but then became an educational boarding establishment for young ladies of delicate health.⁹ The terms were 80-100 guineas per annum, no mean sum, by any means, and all tuition was extra. Naturally, and like so many other English resorts of the time, there were examples of names like Buona Vista and Bellevue, but in Ventnor's case they had an added significance given the precipitousness of the sloping terrain and the zig zag trackways or shutes that formed the earliest means of passage down into the town. Where new roads were eventually formed, they sometimes acquired names that once more reflected alternative climes. That extending from St. Catherine's Church westward behind and above Belgrave Road became Alpine Road, an allusion to its undulant and sinuous course, as well as its generally high elevation. Where dwellings or thoroughfares had other kinds of names, they were typically ones that had meaning for a wealthy and well-to-do class of visitor. Balmoral, Montrose, Grosvenor, Melbourne, Wellington and Clarence were all examples of names that tripped off the tongue with ease and signified respectability of the first order. But why one



Bath Road circa 1860, illustrating the somewhat bare appearance of the landscape. The property nearest the camera is the older, witnessed by the semi-mature garden planting. The ones behind it are plainly newly-erected.

cottage in High Street was called Strelna, the name of a river on the Kola peninsula near the Arctic port of Murmansk, remains arcane. It is true that snow did occasionally fall on the town and there was the odd blizzard. But it did not normally lay very long.

Aside from the names of streets and dwelling houses, few visitors, even in inclement weather, would fail to notice the variety of plants in flower in Ventnor and in different parts of the Undercliff on winter days. Guide-books invariably made reference to this feature as evidence of the mildness of the local climate. Dr. George Martin described cottage garden plots in Bonchurch in the winter season of 1849 as displaying the appearance of being conservatories such was the profusion of different flowers to be found within them. He further noted how tender exotics within the Undercliff frequently withstood winters even in open ground. Altogether, in the month of December, he had counted nearly fifty species of garden flowers blossoming in borders. And even in January it was often possible to gather a handsome bouquet from open gardens. However, even the most fragrant

of winter blooms could not mask the smell of fumes from Ventnor's gas works that permeated parts of the town when the wind was in an easterly quarter in winter. One resident wrote to the *Times* about it in October 1878. He argued that it did harm to the reputation of the place as a residence for invalids. Having recently returned from Paris where he had seen electric light in the Avenue de l'Opéra and in the Grand Magasin du Louvre, he hoped the situation might soon be remedied. But he anticipated that it would require considerable foresight on the part of Ventnor Local Board to rectify the problem and perhaps a willingness to forego some of the profits that the Gas Works generated for the town.

Another feature that, at times, dented the town's reputation was the very fact of it being in an almost semi-permanent state of building, especially in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1840s, side streets were described as sometimes being nothing more than swamps. There were many ungravelled roads and some just petered out into fields. The Ventnor Improvement Committee (later commonly known as the Local Board), formed in 1843, started to tackle the worst of the problems, including drains and sewers, but many observers continued to refer to the numerous stone quarries and the constant traffic of stone carts with all their attendant dust. For a time, areas of ground were rendered devoid of vegetation so much so that a few early photographs of the resort appear to depict a settlement sharing more in common with places on the margins of the Pennine moors, especially given the extensive use of the local freestone in building. None of this is necessarily to suggest that winter resorts on France's mediterranean coast did not at times prove vexatious to its English visitors.¹⁰ And the objections tended to pale when Ventnor became bathed for a few days in unseasonal warmth, with doors and windows flung open and winter fires saved for another day. Granville's informant on Ventnor in winter described the climate in one such season as 'exquisite'. It was one of its few perfections, bettered in Britain only by the climate of Jersey. This is what later brought retired members of the Indian Civil Service and of the Indian Army to Ventnor and the Undercliff. They crop up regularly in the Census returns. In 1891, for instance, Willoughby Clarke, aged 57, was listed as a visitor at Trafalgar House in Ventnor. A colonel in the Indian Army, his place of birth was given as the North West Provinces, suggesting that he was born of a family that had itself been in the colonial service in some form. Death notices in the *Times* afford another record of the lives of such expatriates. The passing of R.V

¹⁰See, for instance, some of the commentary in J. Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford 1987), part four

Correspondence.

SUNSHINE AT VENTNOR.

To the Editor of the I. W. Advertiser and Ryde Times

Sir,—The month of November 1879, though cold, was the finest on record during the last 40 years. The wind was from the north ten days, north-east five, east six, north-west five, west three, and south one. The prevailing wind was therefore northerly, instead of as for the most in former years, from the west and south-west. The mean temperature was above that of November, 1878, by 0.82 deg, but below the mean of the last forty years by 4.70 deg. Snow, sleet, or rain fell on the 1st, 9th, 10th, 20th, 21st, and 24th—six days—amounting to 10.88 of an inch. The 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 11th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 18th, 22nd, 23rd, 28th, 29th, and 30th were bright sunny days—many of them cloudless—and the sunsets frequently marked by extreme beauty; the nights were for the most part equally clear, giving rise to frost. A thermometer placed in the sun during the afternoon under a verandah, with a southern aspect, rose on the 25th to 75 deg. and on the 29th to 73 deg.; and the temperature in front of Rock Cottage and the Marine Hotel was frequently as enjoyable as in summer. Taking the duration of the sun above the horizon at the present time of the year as between eight and nine hours, the amount of sunshine experienced during the month was very considerable.

Your obedient servant,
South Bank, Dec 3, 1879. J. B. MARTIN.

POLITICS IN VENTNOR.

In this letter to the Isle of Wight Advertiser, a close observer of weather remarks on the sunshine enjoyed in Ventnor in the month of November, 1879

Malden, aged 76, a colonel in the Indian Staff Corps, was announced on 23rd December 1913. He was living at St. Maur in Castle Road in Ventnor and the death notice was to be copied to the Indian papers. The Undercliff probably offered echoes of Indian hill stations like Simla, the famous summer capital for British India from 1864. Such hill stations were also health resorts: places where the British routinely and ritualistically repaired to seek refuge in the mountain air, well away from the heat of the plains. And if you study some later nineteenth-century photographs of Simla, for instance, the ascending terraces of buildings, many in traditional English styles, present an uncanny resemblance to Ventnor's rising terraces when viewed from out at sea.

VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH



Upper Mount Cottage (later Combe Wood) in the 1860s, with ladies in their crinolines and gardeners busy with their implements. In this view, it is plainly summertime, but Upper Mount was among the earliest of Undercliff properties to be offered as a winter residence.

CHAPTER THREE

SEARCHING FOR WINTER HEALTH

John Gwilliam described Ventnor in verse in 1844 as comprising ‘the haunts where sickness courts Hygeia’. Hygeia was the goddess of health in Greek mythology and it is clear from Gwilliam’s observation that, within little more than a decade from the time James Clark extolled the virtues of the Undercliff climate, the area had become a magnet for invalids, especially those suffering from phthisis or consumption. One commentator even suggested that Clark’s recommendation set the whole world of invalids in motion: they started descending on the diminutive settlement of Ventnor in droves and there was quickly a desperate shortage of accommodation. This is how, as we have seen, the stage came to be set for a speculative land and building boom. It came to be financed largely by London-based capital. Granville’s informant visitor of 1840 had observed that the place was entirely occupied by invalids suffering from chest complaints. Some arrived in a hopeless state of health and survived just days or a few weeks, but this did not seem to deter others. Owners of properties, both old and new, lost no time in advertising their merits for invalids. Upper Mount Cottage¹¹ in Bonchurch, for example, was offered in an October 1836 issue of the *Times* as a ‘desirable winter residence for consumptive invalids considered by Dr. J. Clark the most unobjectionable part of England’ (in winter). Two years later, in July 1838, there appeared in the *Times* an advertisement for an educational establishment for young ladies. Madeira Cottage, in Ventnor, offered places to children in delicate health or to invalids, the ‘curative influence’ of the local climate cited as a particular advantage. In November 1844, another advertisement merely began: ‘TO INVALIDS – Ventnor, Isle of Wight’. It gave notice that two of the best lodging houses were available to let for the season: Berkshire Villa and The Grove, both located on Grove Road, the thoroughfare where, as we have seen, a series of regency stone villas offered to the resort shades of a Bath or a Buxton. Some twenty years later, the *Times*, on 1st June 1863, was advertising WINTER RESIDENCES FOR INVALIDS in ‘one of the warmest situations’, namely Ventnor, Isle of Wight. Three genteel residences, with seven or eight bedrooms each, were

¹¹Later known as Combe Wood and, more latterly still, Peacock Vane

Berkshire Villa on Grove Road, circa 1860. From the foliage on the tree nearby and the depth of the shadow cast by the roof overhang, this particular picture is plainly taken in summer. But since the orientation of the house is south south west, it would have been a highly desirable spot in Ventnor's winter season.



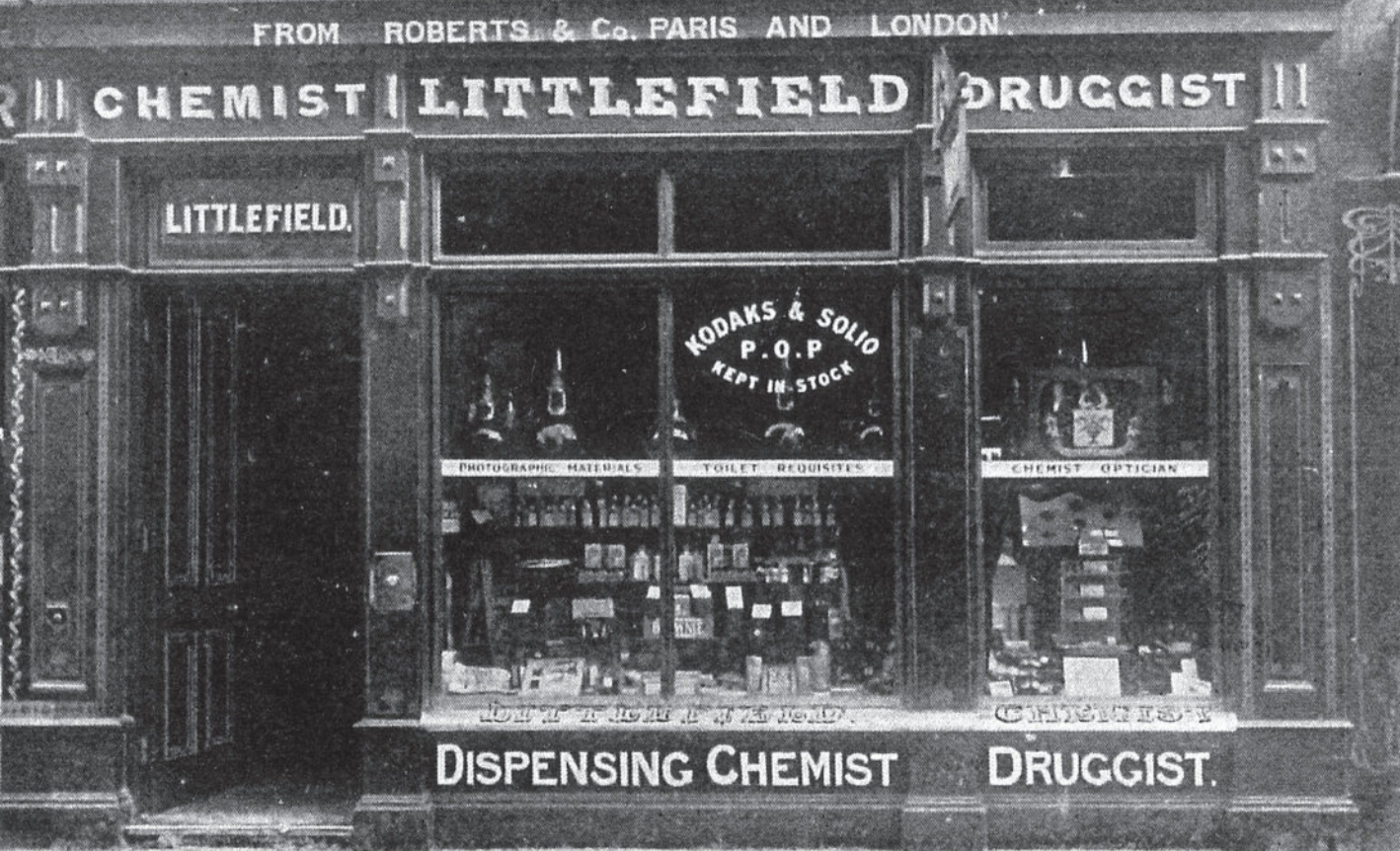
to be let by the week, month or year. The proprietor was W. Bull who lived at Beach Cottage on Ventnor Esplanade.

In a way, Ventnor and invalids were becoming synonymous, especially as the Victorian age unfolded. Burney Yeo, in his *Climate and Health Resorts* (1890) remarked upon its popularity among pulmonary invalids, notwithstanding the presence of the National Consumption Hospital. Earlier, in his work, *Medical Climatology* (1862), Scoresby-Jackson had described the towns(sic) situated along the Undercliff as owing their growth to the demand for winter quarters. For the consumptive invalid, the locality presented peculiar attractions: it was both mild and tonic, that is having enervating properties. James Lindsay's *The Climatic Treatment of Consumption*, which was, incidentally, advertised in the *Times* in June 1887, placed Ventnor ahead of Torquay, Bournemouth, Hastings and other south coast resorts in efficacy, and, once again, not merely because it was host to the National Consumption

Hospital. The hours of sunshine, for instance, were very high for anywhere in England, and not far short of Davos-Platz, the Swiss resort that became famous as a winter retreat for consumptives in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The local physician, Dr George Martin, explained in *The Undercliff of the Isle of Wight* (1849) why the area recorded such high sunshine figures. It was owing to the South by East to South South East aspect which meant that, during winter, the sun was continuously on the Undercliff. An individual could observe it rising above the horizon in the east and setting below the horizon in the west without in any way altering position. The effect of this feature on temperature was then accentuated by the southerly inclination of the Undercliff, the sun's rays falling at a less oblique angle than would be the case on a plane surface, in other words generating greater warming. The many exposed rock faces added further to this warming effect by reflecting not absorbing the sun's heat.

By 1914, judging from a report in a December issue of the *Isle of Wight Mercury*, the reputation of the Undercliff as a winter retreat for invalids seemed to have few geographical bounds. A distinguished physician from Rodney Street in Liverpool urged any readers of the *Liverpool Daily Post* who were considering wintering on the Riviera to try the Isle of Wight instead, where there would be none of the disadvantages of a long transcontinental journey and a foreign language. From the Augusta Hospital in Berlin, another physician described the Undercliff as unsurpassed for the purity and mildness of its atmosphere, while in the *New York Medical Journal*, Ventnor was described as benefiting from air that was almost, if not wholly, the air of the sea, a function of its geographical situation far out into the sea and with a southerly exposure.

Guide-books for Ventnor and the Undercliff were similarly unambiguous about the area's popularity among consumptive invalids. Venables, in 1867, stated that it was widely viewed as a refuge from the chilling blasts of an ordinary English winter. Its climate had the 'highest reputation' for 'prophylactic and curative properties'. Venables went on to record that, such was the lesser diurnal range of temperature in the Undercliff compared with other parts of the Isle of Wight, the Meteorological Reports of the Quarterly Returns of the Registrar-general included a special note that the table for the Undercliff could not be combined with data for other stations. A local weekly newspaper, *Vectis*, in a feature on 11th January 1899, observed that in winter Ventnor was a town of invalids. Lodging-house proprietors, it continued, had a long knowledge of the needs of the sick, supported by a local system of sanitary certificates. Bath chairs and carriages adapted for invalid use were always available. There were Homes(sic) that supplied Sick Nurses(sic). There were also many medical specialists. Linn, in his *Health Resorts of Europe* (1904)



The sign across the very top (From Roberts & Co. Paris and London) makes very plain that this is a high class store.

listed twelve of them. And there had been medical men in Ventnor almost from its beginning. The local diarist, Mark Norman, noted two surgeons and one physician in the town in 1836. One of them, Dr. George Martin, the man who was later to write about the Undercliff, had the patronage of James Clark and established a fashionable practice in the town.

Alongside the medical men were various chemists and apothecaries. A 'Medical Hall' was opened by 1836 at the site now occupied by Boots. It was owned by a man named Gawthorpe who had an apothecary's diploma. He was assisted by one of the surgeons who had had the misfortune to be crippled in a riding accident and so was limited in the ability to practise his profession. Littlefield's chemist and druggist, at 30 High Street, was established around 1859, the site today of Lloyd's Pharmacy. Meanwhile, at 76 High Street was the chemist and druggist run by Charles Smith from 1879. He later took over the Medical Hall. There was yet a further chemist at 4 Regent Parade (Mill Street, later Pier Street): Charles Weston established a business there around 1875. It was later moved to 2 High Street, Weston being succeeded by James Dunning about 1896.

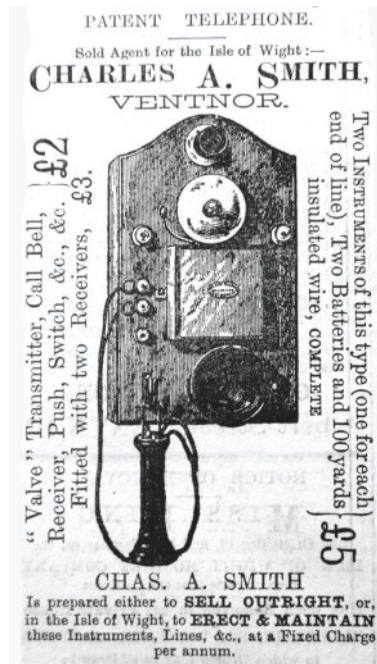


Charles Weston's chemist shop at the bottom of the High Street, circa 1890. The signage on the panel across the top of the shopfront suggests that he had not long moved there. Scott's ironmongers next door is newly-erected and the shop continues today as Hurst's.

All of these chemists dispensed medicines, of course, but what they also sold was an extensive range of what were commonly known as 'invalids' requisites'. *Knight's Household Almanack* for the town in 1889 showed what that could include: quinine and iron tonic, black currant cough elixir, effervescing saline, Isle of Wight Bouquet. All establishments carried different sorts of patent respirators, a type of apparatus that Karl Marx mentions possessing when he was wintering in the resort in the early 1880s. The presence of so many doctors, chemists and druggists cannot be explained save in the context of a large population of visiting invalids, even if they were present only for around half of the year. Much the same can be said of mineral water manufacturers in the town. Hibberds, for instance, established in 1863, used the celebrated spring water that issued from the base of the downs. They made non-alcoholic cordials as well. Another mineral water manufacturer, RUWAIC, the Royal Undercliffe(sic) Waters and Ice Company, was set up in the early 1880s. The factory was

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The chemist Charles Smith acted as agent for an early patent telephone. It seems to have been largely for use as a communication system that was internal to homes.



in Spring Hill and the ‘Royal’ label represented not royal warrant but the fact that the company developed originally from water bottled from mineral springs that issued in the grounds of the Royal Hotel in Ventnor. Other shopkeepers and traders were also well attuned to the town’s invalid clientèle. The Undercliff dairy advertised that special cows were kept for supplying invalids with milk. Wine merchants listed invalids’ stouts among their offerings. Midlothian oatmeal as recommended by local physicians was available from Ventnor Supply Stores, a reminder that the nutritional and health value accorded to oats today, in the twenty-first century, is not exactly new.

One invalid requisite that was in most plentiful supply was sea water. For a century and more, immersion in sea water had been construed by some leading physicians as a cure for all manner of illnesses. Alongside inland spas, therefore, a whole series of spas began to emerge up and down the coast, sometimes styled as watering places. Ventnor did not quite fit this genre, but it did provide sea water baths from a very early stage of its growth. There were baths established on Bonchurch shore in the later 1850s and also at the western end of Ventnor’s Esplanade in what later became Undercliff House (now the Spyglass Inn). Another set of baths was found towards the eastern end of that Esplanade, roughly opposite to the eventual site of the



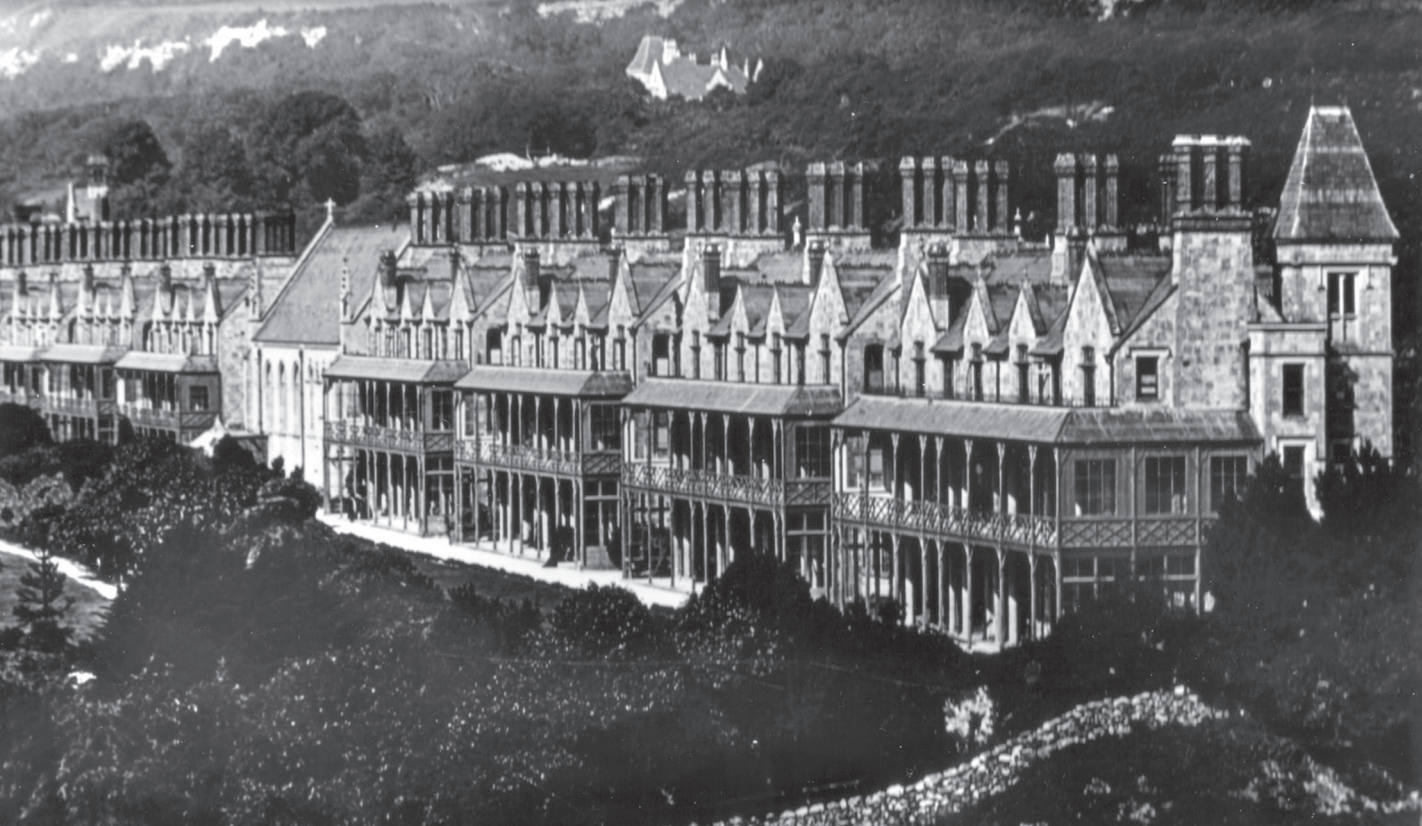
Belgrave Road looking eastward past the Marine Hotel sometime in the 1880s. It is almost certainly during the winter season given the position and length of shadows. However, the sunshine has led to a few windows and doors being opened, while in the roadway a young newsboy clutches his sheaf of papers, perhaps hoping to catch business from hotel guests.

pier. The proprietor of these last baths was Thomas Harding. In 1869, a lady's or gentleman's sea bath there was priced at 8d, or 6 shillings for a dozen. By the 1890s, hot as well as cold sea water baths could be had. Sea water was also delivered to any part of town, a remarkable promise given the steepness of some of Ventnor's streets.

One feature of Ventnor that distinguished it from other health resorts was what was commonly known as the terrace system. The steeply sloping site on which the town grew gave rise to subtle changes of air according to which altitude level you happened to be. The most favoured terrace was Belgrave Road, some 120-150 feet above the cove, facing straight out to sea, and sheltered at its eastern entrance by a large overhanging rock mass. It became a favourite promenade for consumptive invalids and was where the resort's premier hotels and lodging houses were to be found. Those who wished for the benefit of being closer to the sea could reside on the shorter Marine Parade just below or else along the Esplanade itself, immediately above the shore. More bracing conditions were to be found up Grove Road and Spring Hill or along St. Boniface Road. Such sites were best for those consumptives showing more robust health. They gave opportunities for walking the lower downs.

Dr. George Martin summarized the variety of locations that the town offered in his widely read book of 1849, based on more than a decade of experience treating patients in the town. Many were encouraged to move lodgings as their symptoms changed. In general this meant that the weaker would move closer to the shore, the stronger higher up. Martin appeared to have acquired a close grasp of the cases where climate could have an impact on pulmonary disease relative to its various observable stages. He regarded removal to foreign climes as hazardous other than in early stages of the disease. The fatigue and exposure of the journey otherwise left symptoms aggravated. The more favoured course was to seek 'modifications of an English winter', the kind that the Undercliff afforded. Over thirty years later, another Ventnor physician, Dr. J. M Williamson, was writing similarly about the area's climatic benefits in the treatment of consumption. He categorised it alongside Cannes, Menton and Nice in France, and Worthing and St. Leonard's in England. It was in the 'stimulant' class, 'dry, bracing and tonic'. He reported on 542 cases of pulmonary consumption where all patients had spent at least ten weeks in the locality. Of these, 401 'reaped more or less benefit'. Some of the patients were at the Royal National Hospital established at Steephill, just west of Ventnor, in 1869; the remainder were from his private practice. Of the 141 other cases, 28 died and the rest were either worse or unchanged. Williamson went on to remark upon the favourable results achieved in the Undercliff in the treatment of asthma and chronic bronchitis. This found echo in the mid-twentieth century when hundreds of asthmatic or chesty young children were sent from different part of the country for treatment at St. Catherine's School on Grove road, many of them subsequently surviving well into old age.

As a winter retreat for invalids, Ventnor and the Undercliff were overwhelmingly the province of the wealthy or of social groups that answered to the description 'well-to-do'. However, the establishment of the Royal National Hospital or, to give it its proper founding name, 'The National Cottage Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest on the separate principle', rather altered that position. Patients were to be accepted from all over the country, irrespective of creed or practice. In turn, they were to make a small contribution to hospital running costs, but these costs were otherwise to be met from donations, that is from charitable giving. When the Hospital opened, the weekly charge was set at ten shillings which had to be paid in advance. This was no small sum, but it was infinitely less than the figure patients would have paid for board and lodgings in the town or in the Undercliff generally, let alone for medical care and supervision. The ten shillings covered all these contingencies and, moreover, in an environment that had been very carefully designed for the treatment of consumptives. Under its founder, Dr. Arthur Hill Hassall, the hospital design put into



*The startling south frontage of the Royal National Hospital just west of Steephill.
The picture shows seven of the cottage blocks, all with verandahs or balconies
to each floor. The Hospital Chapel is in the centre.*

practice all the best features that local physicians had up to that time reckoned to be conducive to successful amelioration of the symptoms that were typical for patients suffering from consumption. Hassall had been ill himself with pleurisy and came to Ventnor to recuperate after unsuccessful weeks spent in mainland health resorts. When, after some time resting at Ventnor, he found his condition much improved, he conceived of the idea of a hospital there. Its design effectively replicated the pattern that so many consumptive invalids had experienced in the Undercliff: a series of villas (in this instance they were called cottages) with patients occupying single rooms that had direct access to verandahs or balconies that faced south to the sea. Hassall coined the phrase 'the separate principle' to enshrine this sort of treatment, in contradistinction to the conventional hospital arrangement of collecting patients together in wards. The site selected, halfway between Ventnor and St. Lawrence, just above Steephill Cove, was among the warmest and most sheltered parts of the Undercliff. Over the course of time, roughly three decades, ten pairs of cottages were erected along an east-west axis, together with a central service block and a chapel. When complete, the hospital range extended for roughly a quarter of a mile, fronted by extensive grounds stretching to the cliff edge and the sea. Early postcards reveal a spectacular frontage when viewed from the coast path or from ships out at sea.

In the 1881 Census, there were 71 patients listed by the enumerator as present in the institution, 37 men and 36 women. Of the men, 21 were recorded as unmarried, while 34 of the women (the vast majority) were given as spinsters. The average age of the male patients was 29.5, the youngest being 15 and the oldest 57. The average age of the women was slightly higher at 31, the youngest of them 15 and the oldest 58. The Census gives places of birth of individuals, not current domicile, but it is remarkable, nevertheless, the wide national catchment recorded under that heading. Scotland, Wales, the north and midland counties were all represented, even if there were many from London and the south of England. There were even four patients who had been born overseas, one each from Canada, Switzerland, France and Germany.

One of the most striking features about the Hospital was that, apart from day-to-day running, its management was based in London, in the Strand. Heavily reliant as the Hospital was on donations, this turned out to be a key to its success. The 'great and the good' soon lined up to take on the roles of president, vice-presidents, patronesses, lifetime and annual governors, annual subscribers, trustees, to name just a few. Corporations and public companies were also able to take on roles as governors. The activities of the Hospital's London-based general committee soon became regularly apparent from the *Times* newspaper: most often as advertisements requesting funds, sometimes as acknowledgment of new donations or bequests, and at other times in feature articles, particularly when new cottage blocks were opened or when the Hospital was honoured with a royal visit.

The establishment of the hospital was not without local controversy. The general committee in London faced a deputation from aggrieved locals. They were concerned, among other things, about the sheer scale of the enterprise. The local diarist, Mark Norman, seems to have been a persistent critic. He regarded it as the greatest misfortune to have happened to the town, claiming that it deterred new visitors, especially those from the continent. He also claimed that it was of little benefit to local trade, for the Hospital obtained most of its goods from London. The veracity of this latter complaint is partly upheld in a *Times* advertisement of 30th April 1888 in which the Chairman of the Hospital Board invited tenders for about 300 tons of good household screened coals, delivered at St. Helen's Quay or at Medina Wharf. The issue was that there were merchants local to Ventnor who, it was argued, could easily have supplied coal.

By 1889, the hospital had expanded to contain 132 beds and was then admitting over 600 patients a year. As a financial enterprise, it had proved highly successful, enjoying a growing stream of charitable funding over the twenty years since its inception. In no small part this was an outcome of the high profile that Ventnor and the Undercliff already held among London's



A group of well-dressed visitors take in the view from the eastern cliffs above Ventnor on a fine winter's day.

social and economic élites. It was not just the matter of its reputation as a place of recuperation for pulmonary invalids. Equally important was the volume of London capital that had been invested in the town's development. Once the Hospital had been admitting patients for a decade or more, and been seen to be successful in its treatments, the reputation of the propitious local climate, in winter especially, was reinforced. When, in the *Times* in early December 1888, a Windsor family offered their 'old-fashioned' house for let for six weeks that winter, they suggested exchanging it for a house at the seaside, 'Ventnor preferred'. The town, in other words, had not lost any of its status as a salubrious winter retreat.

VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH



*East Dene, Bonchurch, in a Brannon engraving of the 1840s,
part of the body of the house obscured by trees*

CHAPTER FOUR

AN OASIS OF CAPITAL AND MONEY

In October 1843, an auction house at 73, New Bond Street, announced in the *Times* newspaper the sale on the premises, 'a first-class residence' in Bonchurch, Isle of Wight, of the 'very superior modern furniture' contained there. It had been 'manufactured to the best taste of eminent London upholsterers and new within 12 months'. Included were 'two elegant drawing room suites in amber silk damask, rosewood chairs, sofas, ottomans occasional tables, cabinets and commodes formed of choice fancy woods, rich velvet pile carpets, a full-octave grand pianoforte by Zeitter, capital dining room furniture in Spanish mahogany Spanish mahogany four-post and French bedsteads with chintz and damask hangings and excellent bedding, several double-winged and four-feet wardrobes, chests of drawers, toilet and wash tables with japanned, slate and marble tops, cheval and swing dressing glasses' and so the list goes on. The residence in question was East Dene, perhaps Bonchurch's most famous mansion. Catalogues were available on the premises and viewing permitted on the three days previous to the sale. The auctioneer in question regularly held such sales at his rooms in New Bond Street, plainly tapping into the wealthy West End market. Staging such a sale in Bonchurch was in part a reflection of the expense that would have been incurred in moving the contents back to London from whence much of it came, but, more significant, a reflection of the wealth that was already present in the Undercliff by that date. The opulence of East Dene's furnishings was matched by the opulence of the new cast of inhabitants that increasingly had taken up residence in this part of the Island. They were among the potential bidders for the mansion's contents, along with the investors fitting out new villas and apartments for winter letting, anxious to do so in the most fashionable style. East Dene was itself being sold at the same time as its furnishings, so the potential buyer of the property may well have bid for some or all of the furniture. But the auctioneers probably registered that, as would be true today, selling the two separately would likely yield a better return to the vendor.

This auction took place at exactly the same time that John Gwilliam was writing in verse about the way speculation and fashion were turning Bonchurch's 'lone and quiet paths into trim roads and populated ways'. Aged elms and knotted oaks were being rooted up, rocks blasted and



Old cottages along Bonchurch's main street

villas raised of enormous size. For some observers, this was all the 'hand of improvement', but Gwilliam saw only 'tasteless, money-lusting knaves'. The particular context of Gwilliam's censure had been the Act of Parliament that had allowed the Reverend James White, the proprietor of the best parts of Bonchurch, to grant building leases over some 88 acres. In November 1836, 53 of those acres were advertised in the *Times* for disposal in separate lots according to a carefully designed plan by a London architect. The intention was to preserve the exclusive character of any future building through restrictive covenants on leases.

The point at which Ventnor as well as Bonchurch started fully to become an oasis of capital and money was when the estates of Charles Popham Hill Esq. were offered for sale in the *Times* newspaper in September 1837. Aside from the capital mansion house of St. Boniface and the Manor of Bonchurch, it comprised the farms of Bonchurch, Ventnor and Littletown, a water corn-mill, ground rents and fines reserved on building leases, picturesque cottages



*St. Catherine's Church
viewed from the south*

and other properties, the whole estimated to produce a net rental of over £1320 a year. The sale notice remarked that the estate was one of the most well-known, salubrious and picturesque in the country. The number of people, especially invalids, seeking refuge there was rising almost daily. The estate lands encompassed not only much of the village of Ventnor but the land in all directions around it.

The eventual sale of the Popham estate, largely in many separate lots, provided the backdrop for the memorable condition in which those living in Ventnor at the time came to recall. Among them was the young Mark Norman who worked sawing stone in the building of St. Catherine's Church. The neat hamlet was just then 'emerging from obscurity into notoriety', so Norman was much later to record. For capitalists, it was being spoken of 'far and wide' as a new El Dorado. He described flashy London firms arriving with their measuring rods, together with hosts of builders, some 'without capital or credit or character'. There was a chronic shortage of ready money in circulation. After losing employment in the building of the church, Norman went on to do a string of odd jobs but found repeated difficulty getting paid by those who employed him. Promissory notes seemed at one point to be the only money in circulation among building firms.

Norman's remarks may well have reflected a measure of disaffection and his writings, generally, reveal an underlying desire to challenge authority,

seen in his being active in local Chartism. Nevertheless, they afford a telling picture of the ferment of money that drove Ventnor's growth (and that of the Undercliff more widely) for much of the nineteenth century. Over 1843 and 1844, the *Times* newspaper included a string of notices about villas located at the entrance to Ventnor. These were the tall properties along the north side of St. Boniface Road, newly built in Italianate and Gothic styles and known as St. Boniface Terrace. In April 1843, a Savile Row agent announced the auction of freehold ground rents secured on the eight properties to the value of £96 per annum, the current lessees stated to be resident in London. The notice continued by stating that it presented to the capitalist a rare opportunity of 'selling out of the funds at a high rate, and investing in a property not subject to fluctuation'. Some six months later, in September 1843, the centre and right wings of this new terrace were advertised for auction at the Marine Hotel in Ventnor. The rooms were described as expensively fitted and the exteriors enriched with verandahs and balconies. There was also a prospect of buying the freehold at the time of sale, suggesting that the earlier auction of ground rents had either wholly or partly failed. Roughly one year later, the villas were again up for sale or let and described as freehold, the previous attempt at disposal apparently also having failed. This notice urged boarding house proprietors to consider the advantages to be derived from the possession of branch establishments at first-rate watering places, plainly attempting to broaden the constituency of interest. For elegance and convenience, it was claimed, the properties could not be excelled. St. Boniface Terrace was very plainly erected as a speculation and, from the sequence of the adverts, struggled to find buyers. Even so, the scale of the construction enterprise illustrates the very significant capital risk that speculators thought Ventnor warranted at the time.

If it was not new properties that were being erected, it was existing ones that were being advertised as having land available for building. Some of those who had invested in the very early years registered that the spacious plots on which their properties had been built were ripe for subdivision in a rapidly rising market. One such example appeared in the *Times* in March 1844. The five-bedroom house had more than half an acre of garden and a three hundred feet frontage, part of which was eligible for building. Freestone was to be had on the premises. The property was for sale on account of its proprietor leaving the island and one of the agents for the sale was at Curzon Street in Mayfair, adding substance to the quip that Ventnor was by then a kind of 'Mayfair-by-the-sea'. Much the same pattern could be observed some 25 years on when a property on Marine Parade was advertised in the *Times* on 24th May 1869. Aside from claiming that Ventnor was 'the healthiest spot in England', it noted that there was a large garden 'well adapted for



Villas on Marine Parade circa 1900. This was well after owners of buildings with long frontages had disposed of land parcels for further development.

further building', together with a 66 foot frontage. The agent was a solicitor in London's Bedford Row.

What is remarkable about Ventnor as an oasis of capital is the scale of property holdings that some individuals accumulated within only a few decades of the resort's beginning. In February 1853, the *Times* carried an advertisement for a large sale by auction in London of ground rents in the 'improving' town of Ventnor valued at nearly £600 per annum. These comprised numerous excellent residences, the Ventnor Hotel, two public houses, and a large number of dwelling houses, shops and cottages. All were mostly on leases of three lives, subject to renewal fines of two years rent on the fall of each life. In October 1857, in rather similar vein, the *Times* newspaper gave notice that an auction was to be held at the Royal Hotel in Ventnor of 20 lots in the ownership of Mr. Charles Banfield who was leaving the island. These included 'VENTNOR WATER CORN-MILL, working two pairs of stones by an overshot wheel and containing five lofty floors capable of stowing 1,000 quarters of grain; large and convenient dwelling house with a sea view, corn store, yard, stables, outbuildings and large garden; six dwelling houses and a coach house in Mill-Street; dwelling house, corner shop and bakehouse at the corner of Albert-Street and Mill-Street; the Freemason's Tavern and Brewery, with 3½ quarter plant in High-Street; three cottages and blacksmith's shop in Longdown, two private houses in High-Street, distinguished as Cottenham house and Woolton-house, three

coal stores and valuable building ground on the shore.’ The properties yielded an estimated net rental of £400 per annum. Printed particulars were available from a firm of solicitors in Lincoln’s Inn; the property agent, Mr. Abbott, at London’s Bedford-row; from hotels in Portsmouth, Southampton and on the island; and also from Mr. Charles Banfield himself at the Freemason’s Tavern in Ventnor. The range of availability of the particulars indicates that a wide range of potential bidders was expected, underlining once more the way Ventnor and the Undercliff had become perceived as an area where there was prospect of an immense increase in value to investors.

The broad pattern had been replicated in the summer of that same year, 1857, when the St. Lawrence estate, west of Ventnor, had been placed on the market. Extending from St. Lawrence Church to the Old Park estate, the *Times* newspaper on June 13th stated that it comprised some 50 acres of building plots approached by a new road and with access to the shore. The estate particulars described it as ‘situated in the most admired and lovely part of the famed Undercliff’, the salubrity of the climate ‘too proverbial to need comment’. Lots were to be let on lease of 1,000 years at a ground rent. Lithographic plans were to be made available to potential buyers at a wide range of local offices as well as at the Auction Mart in London. It was at London’s Auction Mart that, in March 1859, two of Ventnor’s most desirable seafront properties were offered for sale in the *Times*: St. Augustine Villa and Florence Villa. The former had seven bedrooms, dining, drawing and morning rooms, and extensive terraces; the latter also seven bedrooms, a noble entrance hall, dining, drawing and breakfast rooms, with water and gas laid on. The two properties did not in fact find buyers and so were offered for sale by private contract the following June. Nearly ten years later, in early June 1868, 64 acres of land adjoining Bonchurch and extending into the Landslip were advertised in the *Times* as ripe for freehold building. The area was described as comprising the ‘most beautiful portion of the renowned Undercliff’. In this case details were available from a property agent in London’s Gresham Street. Even Ventnor’s brewery, founded as early as 1840, does not appear to have escaped the clutches of outside investors. A *Times* advertisement of May 1878, inserted by London auctioneers Rule and Head, announced the sale at the London Auction Mart of the Spring Hill Brewery, including two leasehold public houses.

The London Auction Mart was a major property clearing house, located at the time in Bartholemew Lane opposite the Bank of England. That it was being used so often for the disposal of property in Ventnor and the Undercliff provides a clear demonstration of the way the area had become enmeshed in one of the country’s primary circuits of capital. Mark Norman, recalling Ventnor’s expansion, observed how ground rents in the town seemed all to



This picture shows Ventnor's principal terraces by 1867. The cliff area behind and to the right of the photographer remains to be built upon, but otherwise the various rock ledges are packed with buildings, most erected within the preceding twenty years.

be in the hands of strangers and how they grew over the decades so that they amounted to many thousands of pounds. Brannon in 1841, in *Picture of the Isle of Wight*, talked of building land having risen up to tenfold in value since 1830 at the more eligible sites. As part of such a capital circuit, the town was naturally prey to slump as well as boom. Mark Norman observed that the place took a rise from 1836 to 1852 but after that stood still for over 12 years. He also noted that a slump set in from the late-1880s when business began falling off owing to a poorer class of visitors, fashionable London doctors allegedly despatching their patients to Bournemouth rather than to Ventnor. It is difficult to judge fully the accuracy of Norman's assessments, but there is no doubting the remarkable trail of bankruptcies that Ventnor tradesmen manifested over the years from 1888 to 1891. No less than 11 were officially recorded by the *Times* alone, five in 1888. No trade seemed exempt. They included a painter and glazier; boot and shoemaker; ironmonger; tobacconist and fancy goods dealer; baker, confectioner and dairyman; watchmaker and jeweller; tailor and outfitter; grocer and pork butcher. *Knight's Household Almanack* for Ventnor for 1889 provides us with clues as to the reasons for such a scale of business failure. Those still trading often advertised that their

terms were CASH, or that goods were supplied at any London store price for cash. The bankrupt tradesmen may not just have been hit by a falling off in custom but by unsettled accounts among seasonal visitors who typically demanded credit and long payment terms. In a buoyant business cycle, such laxity could be carried to a degree, especially given the high end goods that many were offering for sale to the town's seasonal residents, bringing high margins of profit. In a downturn, though, it became a matter of survival, with suppliers of goods pressing for their outstanding bills to be met.

The falling off of business in Ventnor in the late 1880s appears to have been mirrored in part of the town's accommodation trade, for in January 1888, the *Times* reported the compulsory winding up of the Royal Hotel Ltd. The Royal was among the oldest and most distinguished of Ventnor's hostleries, standing on one of the best sites at the western end of Belgrave Road. It had only recently been newly furnished, for in March 1887 the then manager had placed a notice in the *Times* to this effect, also including an extract from a letter from delighted visitors: they were sitting in the grounds enjoying 'warm sun and balmy air'. The Royal's principal business competitor was the Royal Marine, located further east along Belgrave Road, directly overlooking Ventnor Cove. In June 1890, according to a notice in the *Times*, it was seeking £25,000 of additional share capital in order to make the venture into a limited company. Its net profits, it was stated, had recently allowed an eight per cent dividend on shares. Quite why the Royal Marine appeared to be bucking the business downturn is unclear. But it may have been connected with its aristocratic and high class clientèle. It enjoyed the patronage of HRH Princess Beatrice and other members of the English royal family, as well as of members of continental royal houses. Prominent Americans were also among its regular visitors. The account of the hotel published in *Industrial Great Britain* in 1894 presented it as forming the acme of contemporary luxury, with a hydraulic elevator for passengers and luggage, bathrooms in every wing and a cellar stocked with some of the choicest vintages of the century. The additional £25,000 of share capital sought in 1890 may have made its mark in bringing the hotel to the premier condition described a few years later.

The failure of the Royal Hotel in 1888 was far from the only case of major financial collapse in the town. In February 1866, it was announced in the *Times* that the Ventnor Harbour Company had been forced into liquidation by creditors, all its property offered for sale a few months later. Begun in 1863, the scheme had involved construction of western and eastern breakwaters to form a harbour of refuge, roughly 180 feet wide at its entrance. The work involved driving timber piles in two parallel lines for each breakwater, then infilling with stone, rock and soil. Sadly, this type of construction proved inadequate at such an exposed site and the venture failed. In 1864, 1865,

AN OASIS OF CAPITAL AND MONEY



Church Street on a damp day in autumn or spring. This can be dated to the early 1900s, for the new Post Office stands half way up on the left. Nearly all Ventnor's main street shops had extensive living accommodation above, often extending to three or four storeys and nearly always separately accessed from front doors at street level.

(below) The grand dining room of the highly successful Royal Marine Hotel in the early 1900s. It would not have been out of place in London's West End.





The very incomplete western breakwater of the refuge harbour on 29th June 1863. On that day, even though only around 100 yards of the breakwater was in place, the Harbour Company decided to open it to visiting steamers. In this view, in conditions of low water, the 170-foot, twin-funnelled paddle steamer 'Chancellor' is anchored out in the Bay and can be seen landing passengers by means of small boats. Notice the celebratory arch of foliage at the entrance to the breakwater and the many flags. Two days later the same paddle steamer called again and was brought alongside the pier on a falling tide. When, several hours later, she went to move astern to depart, it was discovered that her bow had grounded on rock. That night, as the tide came in, her fore compartment flooded. Later, strong winds blew up and, in a heavy swell, the vessel broke her moorings and her stern turned broadside on to the beach, the hull eventually breaking in two. It was an ill omen.

and early 1866, successive storms resulted in repeated damage to the two breakwaters. There was a progressive scouring out of much of the infill, as well as destruction of large parts of the timber piling. By March 1866, the sea had free current through many parts of the structures according to the local newspaper. What assets remained were offered for sale at London's New Auction Mart in Tokenhouse Yard later in 1866. The *Times* notice stated that it also included an esplanade frontage of upwards of 1100 feet and a number of plots of building land 'adapted for terraces, villas etc..... capable of producing a large rental'. It further noted that existing house and hotel accommodation was totally inadequate for the requirements of Ventnor which was 'increasing in public estimation daily'. The sale was to be without reserve, allowing opportunity for the formation of another company, with only small capital, but reaping all the benefits of the large outlay by the now defunct business venture. The paradox was that the need for a refuge harbour was shortly to be rather overtaken by the extension of the railway from Shanklin to Ventnor in September 1866. Here was the more obvious means of bringing coal, timber and other bulky commodities to the Undercliff. As it turned out, the auction of the assets in London failed, according to a notice in the *Times* in late September 1866. What happened instead is that the remaining two piers were auctioned locally, one bought for £460, the other for just 70 guineas, according to an account in the *Isle of Wight Observer* in February 1867. Loose timbers (many strewn over the beach) were also sold and for some days it was said that waggonloads of broken 'caulks' were continually passing through the streets, some eventually used in the town's buildings.

Ventnor Harbour Company had begun with a capital of £15,000 in 750 shares of £2 each and that capital was later increased to £100,000 as plans were augmented. The company's Chairman was also Chairman of the Stokes Bay Railway and Pier Company and resided at South Stoneham near Southampton. Other directors were also from the mainland, but there were nevertheless a few who were resident in the Undercliff, including James Coape at Mirables, near Niton, and F. Hatherley Esq. at Luccombe. Hatherley's main home, however, was at Eaton Place in Belgravia, illustrating once more the way Ventnor and the Undercliff became a focus of speculative investment among London's wealthy élites. How much the company's directors had themselves invested in the abortive venture is unclear, but, ultimately, investors saw most of their funds sink without trace, including the tradesmen in the town who had viewed the harbour as potentially beneficial to their businesses. They were not enriched as the company prospectus had claimed they would be. Nor was the town improved. Indeed, the net outcome was even more disastrous: Devonshire Terrace, a row of fine villas on the cliff above the eastern breakwater, had their foundations undermined by the altered actions of the sea, following the

construction work. The town's sewage outfall no longer functioned properly for the same reason. Rotting seaweed had also begun accumulating on the beach and in the harbour instead of being carried away on the tides. Even part of the Esplanade west of the breakwater had been undermined in gale conditions and needed immediate repair. The year 1866, of course, was one of major bank failure when Overend Gurney & Co., known as 'the banker's bank' collapsed with an £11 million debt. Bank rates subsequently rose to 10 per cent for a while and several hundred other companies, including banks, failed. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in so dire a financial climate, the liquidation of the company and the sale of its assets by London's premier auction house was unsuccessful. For Ventnor, the business community was fortunate to be offered the lifeline of railway connection later that year.

With the idea of a refuge harbour firmly abandoned, it was not long before suggestions were made for an open iron pier, following the pattern of so many other coastal resorts. It was registered that such a structure would present far less resistance to storm wave action and hence stand far greater chance of survival and economic success. By 1872, the project was already in progress, but what firmly distinguished it from the Refuge Harbour is that the vast majority of its shareholders were townspeople. It was not the speculative enterprise that the Harbour had been, with its external capital, especially from among London entrepreneurs in search of rapid returns. By 1873, the pier shank, some 480 feet long, was complete and open for public use. Unfortunately, though, progress thereafter became desperately slow through want of funds and it was not until 1881 that pierhead and landing stage were complete. But then disaster once again struck. A fierce November gale that same year wrecked parts of the new timber landing stage and then the loose baulks were soon being hurled against the iron piles of the pier itself. Within a short time, the pierhead had collapsed into the sea and all that remained properly intact was the shoreward end of the pier neck. In the autumn of 1882, storms caused yet further damage to the structure and the Ventnor Local Board took the decision to begin anew on its own account. The pier project became, in effect, a local municipal enterprise, set outside of the familiar workings of nineteenth century capital. The new structure was complete by 1887 and had its first full year of operation in 1888 when 10,000 excursionists disembarked from paddle steamers plying from mainland resorts.

The pier's success signalled the growing power and confidence of local government in the town and a corresponding fading of the pervasiveness of private London capital that had been such a hallmark of Ventnor's development for nearly sixty years. There were still large numbers of buildings where ground rents were held by outsiders and there were, in turn, many properties still in external ownership. The *Times* for July 1888, for example, included an



This is where Church Street in Ventnor becomes Belgrave Road. Property agents, Watson, Bull & Porter occupy the premises on the left, while through the elegant wrought iron arch, topped by an equally elegant glass lantern, is Belgrave Chambers, designed by and in the occupation of Theodore Saunders, architect, surveyor and civil engineer. The date is around 1900 and, although only a small part of the building is visible, it has a distinction of design that would not at all been out of place in London's West End.

*The disastrous wreck of the first pier, fatally damaged in the storms of November 1881.
It was to be another seven years before it was re-built.*



VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH

an auction advertisement for ground rents of £84.5s per annum secured on seven 'capital residences' in Bonchurch. In October 1889, the paper announced the sale at London's Auction Mart of ground rents in Ventnor worth between £22 and £40 per annum, secured on properties that included numbers 1-5 Alexandra Gardens. In May 1899, the local property agents, Francis Pittis and Son, announced the auction of a string of valuable freehold properties along Belgrave Road and Zig Zag Road, together with various valuable building plots. They were part of the estate of the late Barnet Meyers, an individual who had plainly lived off land and property rents, the Ventnor portfolio almost certainly amassed when investment in the town by London entrepreneurs was at its zenith earlier in the century. The legacy of the time when the town was viewed as 'Mayfair-by-the-sea' was not going to disappear overnight. However, what was also beginning to change was the appeal of Ventnor as a winter retreat. The plethora of advertisements that had once proclaimed to *Times* readers the salubrity of the Undercliff's air were starting to fade from view. By the early 1900s, it is the Royal National Hospital that more and more accounts for the best part of Ventnor's entries in the newspaper. However, there was apparently no shortage of well-to-do *Times* readers locally, for the town, alone on the entire Island in 1905, had three shops that acted as agents for small advertisements for inclusion in the newspaper. The pattern was visible, too, in the 'situations wanted' columns, as in the case of a 44-year old butler at Salisbury Gardens in Ventnor who sought out new employment in June 1905. His notice announced that he was 'used to town and country', and could supply a 'personal character in London'; he also had experience as a valet for shooting. How many servants in other towns the size of Ventnor, I wonder, would have been offering their services in quite this way?

AN OASIS OF CAPITAL AND MONEY



A long line of semi-detached villas on Alpine Road, their backs looking directly out to sea. All were built as a speculation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH



A fine studio portrait of a young woman, dressed in the very best of fashionable tastes. She may have been a member of a wealthy local family, but as likely a representative of the resort's well-to-do visiting population.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOCIETY

*'Ventnor! With what propriety can Taste
Extol thy features! - thou art so defil'd
With cockney villas, dandies, smirking belles,
Proud parvenus, insipid, gawky apes,
Poor, puny invalids, and pension'd drones'.*

This was John Gwilliam in 1844 bemoaning how fashion was disfiguring Ventnor just as he had claimed it had been spoiling Bonchurch nearby. One had, he opined, to ascend the summit of St. Boniface Down to recover the once picturesque spot that comprised the nascent town. Illuminated by the mid-day sun, its villas, rocks and stunted trees could almost pass for a painterly subject. But quit the Down once more and the vision soon faded. There were dwellings that dazzled (the cockney villas¹²) and ungainly shops. There were 'fops, fools, and giggling girls'. There was a 'sickly, pale, attenuated race of ghastly debauchees, whose tottering limbs seem(ed) fitted only for the dance of death'. Tourists were warned to mind their pockets for anyone with a scanty purse would find few luxuries in Ventnor's shops. However, with no dearth of cash, one could 'revel like a prince' and find 'all a gourmand needs'. Gwilliam did, though, concede that there was 'a goodly show of dames, kind, affable and crummy' and, last but not least, 'a splendid pleasure beach for maritime ablution'.

There is plainly an element of comic satire in Gwilliam's verses, but they yet provide a suggestive template for unmasking something of the society that Ventnor became in the Victorian age. The local diarist, Mark Norman, recalled the invalids who came to Ventnor for the winter months in the decades up to about 1860 and for whom 'dark days and long nights were

¹²Over the nineteenth century, the phrase 'cockney villas' became a kind of generic term used to describe new homes of the well-to-do middle class. The term was essentially derogatory, such homes regarded as vulgar, typically the work of minor architects or else run up by jobbing builders from pattern books. John Ruskin and William Morris became especially vocal critics. See G. Stamp, *Anti-Ugly: Excursions in English Architecture and Design* (London, 2013), pp. 202ff

rather irksome'. Norman was among a group of local inhabitants who started a literary and scientific institute and held 'penny readings' to occupy some of them. Norman also described there being well-to-do residents in the town who were not averse to mixing with the ordinary inhabitants for their amusement. Some of these residents happily lent their grounds for 'field and musical promenades'. Sometime later, in 1877, a patient at the Royal National Hospital described the town's visitors as 'very fashionable' but 'nearly all invalids'. Their benevolence towards the institution, then less than ten years since its opening, was, according to the 27-year old Thomas Fry, considerable. Concerts were staged with the help of a few professionals and the proceeds of ticket sales applied to the Hospital's upkeep.

We pick up glimpses of the well-to-do pensioners who had removed to Ventnor from occasional death notices in the *Times* newspaper. In late January 1887, Serjeant Sleigh, a former distinguished practitioner at the English Bar, was reported as having passed away, aged 69, while spending the winter convalescing at Ventnor. In June 1889, the death was announced in the *Times* of Harvey Dickinson, aged 88, at Melrose Villa, in Madeira Road, late of the East India Company. One can add to the picture by perusing some of the pages of the 1891 Census for Ventnor. At Katrine Villa on Madeira Road was one of the various ex-colonials who sought refuge in the Undercliff airs, in this case a 48-year old retired major from the Bengal Army. Swiss Cottage, on Belgrave Road, had an 82-year old retired professor of ophthalmic medicine and surgery among its boarders. A former solicitor and high bailiff was recorded as the 75-year old household head at Milanese Villa in Bath Road. A retired Australian farmer, aged 49, lived at Navarino Villa on St. Boniface Road. Among other superannuees were ministers of the church, former members of the Home Civil Service, and former officers of the British Army. Few of these individuals appear to have had any former connection with Ventnor or with the Island. They came plainly in the hope that the temperate winter climate would ease the various afflictions of old age, or help counter the effects upon health of years of overindulgence.

Invalids were not, of course, confined to the old. The average age of patients at the Royal National Hospital was clear enough testament to that. John Pemble, reviewing the annual winter migration of the English to the French Riviera, quotes one observer of the daily express train to the south from Paris as carrying forth 'a flow of maimed existence', including pale young Oxford men who had found their health fading on the way to legal preferment and young ladies sickening even before their first season. Ventnor and the Undercliff, generally, was no stranger to such sad misfortune. In March 1888, William Abbott, the London property auctioneer who had over the years handled much of Ventnor's real estate, announced in the *Times* the



*Florence Villa in the right centre of the picture, St. Augustine Villa
above far right and the pier neck in the right foreground*

death, at Ventnor, of his only son Charles, aged 21, very probably a victim of consumption. February 1889 brought announcements of the deaths in Ventnor of Alfred Austin, aged 26 and Ada King, aged 23, with consumption again as the most likely cause. In December 1890, Louisa Jane Armstrong of Old Bond Street, died at Ventnor aged just 27. The younger the victim's age so the more poignant the announcements and the greater the measure of detailed offered. In July 1859, a notice appeared in the *Times* of the death at Florence Villa in Ventnor of Clara Adeline Flintoff, of consumption, aged 18. She was the daughter of the late Owen Flintoff of Trinity College, Cambridge, barrister-at-law and Chief Justice of Sierra Leone. An even more heart-rending death had occurred in Ventnor in March 1841. This was of a young man aged about 22 who was a citizen of New London, Connecticut. Having completed his studies at Yale eighteen months before, he had embarked for Europe to enrich his mind and, in particular, to advance his acquaintance with the language and literature of Germany. However, towards the end of 1840 he was stricken with lung disease while staying at Dresden. After an exhausting journey in the depth of winter he reached London where doctors gave little chance of recovery. Finally, he was encouraged to seek relief in the mild atmosphere of Ventnor. But from the time of his arrival there, late in February 1841, it became clear that he was in mortal decline. Much like some of the young patients who died at the Royal National Hospital, he arrived in

the Undercliff in far too debilitated a condition for the climate there to have any benefit. Mediterranean-like air offered no cure for consumption. What it did was aid the human body's powers of resistance to the condition through fresh air, exercise and the removal of sources of stress and fatigue.

Death notices in the *Times*, among the young, were distressing evidence that, even for those of ample means, there was sometimes no resisting the tubercule bacillus. But for every such death in Ventnor and the Undercliff there were many young people who survived, as indeed they did at the Royal National Hospital. By day, these were the individuals who, along with older invalids (pensioners or otherwise), spent hours wandering, sitting or lying on the beach when the weather allowed. One chronicler, writing in the year 1890, described how wonderfully dry and bright it had been in February, March and April. There had been only four thoroughly wet days, and only eleven days that were wet in the morning or the afternoon. In all, this amounted to only nine and a half days out of 89. This was invaluable for invalids eager to enjoy every opportunity of being out in the open air, partaking of exercise where they were able. The chronicler in question had arrived in Ventnor in darkness and had been alarmed by the noise and din at the railway station. He thought Ventnor must be a very large place, or else it must consist chiefly of hotels. He remarked that invalids and care-worn relatives or friends seemed to be constantly arriving. Here was the same 'flow of maimed existence' that could be observed at railway stations on the way south from Paris to the French Riviera. And a few of the tottering sick, holding grimly on to the arms of their attendants, might at times have thought they were on France's southern shores, for French could be spoken in many of the smarter hotels and boarding houses. The apparently intense traffic of invalids resulted in the local railway company, in 1891, providing a non-stop express service especially for them. The journey from Ryde to Ventnor was cut to 17 or 18 minutes against the usual 30 minutes. At the Ventnor terminus, meanwhile, a sedan chair was available to convey the weakest patients from the platforms to their waiting conveyances.

This same chronicler went on to remark that Ventnor was 'decidedly dull', socially, in part a consequence, he speculated, of the 'dearth of bachelors' and the 'superabundance of spinsters' in the place. The limit of the latter's society appeared to be 'afternoon teas and mild musical "at homes"'. One can probably assume that use of the description 'spinster' in this instance was more a surrogate for women living on their own means who were either unmarried or widowed, the latter perhaps akin to the 'pensioned drones' of Gwilliam's verses of 1844. A few were long-standing inhabitants of Ventnor or of the Island, but the majority were either boarding in lodging houses or visitors who had taken villas for the season or for longer. Scrolling down



Ventnor station in the first decade or so of its existence, with an omnibus and a private carriage awaiting custom.

some of the pages of the 1891 Census, one quickly picks out the identities of such people. For example, away from the shops towards the upper end of the High Street and on to Trinity Road, they appear in increasing numbers. Helen Babington, a 70-year old widow and a Londoner by birth, occupied Percy Cottage. At Woolton Cottage, a 59-year old widow, Maria Sheppard was a lodger, her birthplace recorded as Rotherhithe, just south of the Thames in the capital. Maria Weedon, aged 62 and single, another Londoner by birth (Bayswater), was boarding at Cottenham House. At Palestine Cottage, Ella Harrison, a young widow born in Putney, was given as a lodger. Further on, at Holly Mount, were two sisters, Mary Francis and Caroline Price, aged 52 and 50 respectively, one single and one a widow. They were born in Mauritius, though both noted to be British Subjects. Mary Francis was the household head and recorded as visiting her at Holly Mount was a 28-year old widow and her four-year old child. This particular young woman was born in Sydney, New South Wales, the child in Durban, South Africa. Such exotic birthplaces, together with the numbers of individuals whose place of birth was London or its vicinity, come as little surprise given the profile that Ventnor held in the Times newspaper. Not only was it an oasis of London capital or wealth, but it was a focus of some of that city's social formations, elements of the society of the West End and its suburbs transplanted to a place by the sea. Occasionally, one obtains a glimpse of the interiors of the lodging houses where such well-to-do visitors stayed, for when the contents

of Belle Vue Cottage in nearby Spring Hill were auctioned in June 1863, these were revealed to include 'mahogany four post, tent and other bedsteads', 'rosewood loo¹³ and card tables', 'recumbent and other chairs or couches covered in drab damask', 'mahogany dining tables', 'Brussels and Kidder carpets' as well as 'chintz and figured damask curtains'. These were no ordinary furnishings, but ones that befitted the style of living of social groups with ample means.

Had you, in 1891, wandered away from the upper part of the High Street into Dudley Road and to Devonshire Terrace, both rather closer to the eastern cliffs and to the sea, you would have registered a not dissimilar set of clientèle. The 1891 Census reveals three Irish sisters, ages 42, 40 and 37, all of them single and all of independent means, lodging at 8, Devonshire Terrace. Close by at 2, Devonshire Terrace were three young members of the Skeat family, two sisters and a brother, all in their twenties and all single. They were listed as boarders and all living on their own means. They were born in Cambridge. At 1, Devonshire Terrace, Eliza Longcroft, a single woman aged 41 of independent means lived with her older brother, James, who was given as household head and also of independent means. Eliza's place of birth was Peckham in Surrey, her brother's was Bethnal Green in London. On Dudley Road and Devonshire Terrace there appear to have been fewer widows than was the case on the upper High Street and beyond. But it is not hard to see from this evidence why an early commentator might refer to a superabundance of spinsters in the place, especially with regard to its visitor population.

Alongside the often comfortably off widows and spinsters in the town were representatives of the new wealth of the age, Gwilliam's 'proud parvenus'. These were individuals who had acquired enhanced social status through certain types of novel capital accumulation, particularly as manufacturers or merchants. For the traditional aristocracy and landed gentry, they came to be regarded as *nouveaux riches*, people without social pedigree, upstart magnates that matched the upstart towns of the industrial revolution and from whence many of them came; they were proud because they desperately sought to mimic the social behaviour of those who inherited their wealth and their social position; they were ever conscious of the possibility that their new-found status might one day be undermined. Looking through the 1891 Census and, notably, at the lists of visitors at the premier hotels, the best villas and the better lodging houses, one quickly registers that Ventnor was very much a favoured resort for so-called 'new money'. In

¹³Loo was a card game.



*Devonshire Terrace with its elaborate wooden balustrading,
a model of uniformity of stylistic treatment*

April that year, along the various terraces above Ventnor Cove, there were all manner of manufacturers in residence: a silk spinner from Clayton near Bradford, a mungo manufacturer¹⁴ from Pudsey in Yorkshire, a retired Huddersfield mill-owner, a London leather manufacturer, an ironfounder and bridge-builder, a chemical manufacturer, as well as various merchants and shipowners, a number of whom were German. Here were the clientèle that justified the opulence displayed in venues like the Royal Marine Hotel with its dramatic entrance conservatory festooned with exotic palms, its hydraulic elevator, its *ensuite* apartments, its famed kitchen and vintage cellar. The hotel's social caché was enhanced by the royal patronage that it enjoyed. The proprietor of the Royal Marine Hotel at the time was William Judd and the list of his live-in staff included a book-keeper, a housekeeper, a chef, a page, two still-room maids, two chambermaids, a vegetable maid, a kitchen porter, two waiters, a groom, a porter and a tapster. Here was the hotel that had recently shown an eight per cent dividend on its shares. It was these entrepreneur manufacturers who supported the high-class shops

¹⁴Mungo is a textile made from re-used materials

*Notices in the Isle of
Wight Advertiser of
24th November 1888*

Houses & Apartments to be Let, &c

VENTNOR—A Gentleman's Residence, detached, To be Let for the season, containing 1 handsome dining room, 2 drawing, and 5 bed rooms, box room and fitted bath room, garden, lawn; in a bright and sheltered position adjoining Bonchurch; terms 5½ guineas per week.—Apply to Mr J. Spary, house agent, Ventnor

NO. 6, DEVONSHIRE TERRACE—the Whole or in Apartments; comprising 3 Sitting and 7 Bed-rooms. With or without attendance. Sea and Land Views—Croquet Lawn, &c. Good cooking.—Apply, Mrs. Budd.

APARTMENTS for one Gentleman, TO BE LET for the Winter, a comfortable Bed-room and Sitting-room. Terms 12s per week.—Apply at Woodbine Cottage, Tulse-hill, Ventnor.

VENTNOR, I.W.—Two Sitting-rooms and Six Bedrooms in Whole or Part; uninterrupted Sea View, Good Cooking, and Attendance. Terms Moderate.—E. Harbourn, 9, Devonshire-terrace.

DEVONSHIRE TERRACE, No. 8—3 sitting and 6 bed-rooms, in whole or part. Fine sea view and croquet lawn. Good cooking and attendance.—Mrs. Rennick.

WOOLVERTON COTTAGE, St Lawrence TO LET, either for the whole or in apartments This cottage is prettily situated on the road between the Rectory and Old Park, well furnished, moderate rental.—Also a larger house near with unequalled sea and land views.—Apply at the house.



The remarkable vestibule of the Royal Marine Hotel, festooned with palms and other exotic plants. This picture is taken from the version of the hotel brochure that was entirely in German, a reminder of the cosmopolitan range of Ventnor's visitors.

SOCIETY

found on Ventnor's principal streets, a microcosm of what could be found in London's West End as we will shortly see. They were joined by senior members of the professions, forming another important group of well-to-do guests staying above Ventnor Cove: barristers and solicitors, auctioneers, insurance brokers, members of the colonial service, surgeons and professors. A number of Ventnor's hotels, plainly conscious of the elevated social status of many of their visitors, recruited staff by means of advertisements placed in London's *Times* newspaper. In July 1887, the Royal Hotel sought out a lady book-keeper. In the following month, the Esplanade Hotel was advertising for a woman cook. In February 1878, the Crab and Lobster Hotel had even used the newspaper to recruit a 'respectable steady young man' as a waiter. And as we have already seen, it was not at all unusual for such hotel employees themselves to advertise in the *Times* for placements. A cook at the Royal Hotel used the newspaper in March 1887 to offer her services to 'a high class family', requesting a salary of £50 a year, no mean sum at the time.

Another window on Ventnor's visitor population is provided by a remarkable piece of documentary survival. It is the visitor register for the Clarendon Boarding House. Established in the mid-1870s by Harriet Merriman who had formerly run the Clarendon Inn at Chale, it came to be among Ventnor's largest and most well-to-do boarding houses, located near the top of Grove Road, just a few minutes down from the main railway station. The terms were 25 to 35 shillings a week in 1889, that is at least £100 a day in today's values. With a butler and a string of live-in servants, it offered standards of comfort that made it 'home from home' for the ranks of the 'well-to-do'. Of the guests whose names appear in the visitor book between early October 1901 and May 1902, some two thirds came from the London area. Their fashionable addresses on Northumberland Avenue, Queensboro Terrace, and in districts such as Dulwich, Twickenham, Highgate and Forest Hill speak volumes for the class of visitors they represented, an echo of the prominence of London-based capital in Ventnor's runaway expansion. Alongside wealthy Londoners, there were visitors from Bournemouth, Brighton, Tenby, Tonbridge and St. Leonard's, all of them fashionable centres in their day. There were also foreign visitors: from Ontario, Arizona, Sweden and Germany. Indeed, as one passes an eye across the many pages of the Clarendon's visitor register, it is striking how cosmopolitan the boarding house seems to have been, in both winter and summer seasons. Over the year 1908, for instance, the overwhelming majority of paying guests came from Germany and from Holland: from Munich, Hamburg and Goslar in the Harz Mountains, and from Amsterdam, The Hague, Arnhem and Nijmegen. At other times, there were visitors from as far afield as Cape



The Clarendon Boarding House near the top of Grove Road: a view taken in winter, but plainly on a sunny day, when window sashes had been opened to the sea air.

Town, Melbourne, San Francisco and Nelson (New Zealand). Beatrice Marshall wrote at the end of her stay in May 1897 that she was 'very sorry to say goodbye to the cosmopolitan Clarendon'. Guests appeared to respond with great favour to the range of nationalities they encountered. At the same time, they repeatedly remarked on the boarding house's 'homely comforts'. It was a highly regulated house, but without some of the social pretensions of the classiest hotels.

Unlike the Census, the Clarendon visitor book does not tell us the occupation of the guests. However, there are occasional clues. One address entry was given as the British Museum, for example, another as the Royal Colonial Institute, yet another as Wadham College Oxford. Here, it seems, was a clutch of academics in search of rest or recuperation. Members of the clergy and members of the medical profession also figure in the visitor lists. In winter, guests typically stayed for significantly longer periods than those in summer, often for two to three months, and were plainly among those living off independent means, matching the pattern that prevailed across many parts of Ventnor and the Undercliff. J.L. Burke of Brook Green in the west of London recorded his fourth visit in February 1902 and anticipated it



37 VENTNOR (Isle of Wight). —
The Clarendon. — L.L.

Another view of the Clarendon Boarding House, this time looking down not up Grove Road. Here it is plainly summertime or early autumn. It is not hard to see why visitors returned here over and again. The Boarding House formed an oasis of peace and quiet, with its wonderfully sheltered verandah and garden.

to be just the prelude to a lengthy sequence. Miss A.A. Hall, of Donnington Square, Newbury, passed the winter of 1883-4 at the boarding house and wrote how she had no hesitation in recommending it to others. Isabella Chalmers from Blairgowrie in Scotland stayed from January through to the end of April 1897, remarking how she had experienced much kindness. In the spring of 1912, the Misses Smith, Munro and Beeston recorded that they were 'pierced to the heart at having to leave', all three of them having come down from various parts of London. Gwilliam in 1844 would have been hard pressed to have predicted the range of Ventnor's international guests by the final decades of the Victorian era, but the Clarendon's visitors' book otherwise bears out with uncanny accuracy the social disposition and social propensities of the people who sojourned there. Evenings spent at whist or bagatelle, afternoons on promenades or excursions, reveille marked by the sounding of a giant gong prompt every morning at eight, another bell for prayers, invalid fare available on request and meals served in guest bedrooms for those prescribed rest.

Given the relative wealth of Ventnor's winter visitors, one might have anticipated something of the social theatre that, for well over a century, had

characterized upper class spas like Bath and Buxton or Cheltenham and Leamington. Certain of the signs are evident in Ventnor: for instance, the lists of visitors that were published for the town from as early as the mid-1840s. The weekly newspaper, the *Ventnor Diamond*, was among the first to do so. Fletcher Moor was its printer and publisher and by 1857 he started producing visitor lists as a separate entity, coming out twice monthly and priced at one penny. Local newspapers like the *Isle of Wight Advertiser* were still publishing such lists in the later decades of the nineteenth century. They would sometimes occupy three or four columns of the broadsheet, typically headed 'Visitors and Residents'. Those printed in October would sometimes show a number of establishments empty, but those for December or January invariably revealed a much higher rate of occupancy. The same newspapers also published lists of new 'hotel arrivals'. Another feature that might be expected to suggest something of the society of a Bath or of a Buxton was the use of the *carte-de-visite*, that is calling cards that effectively announced a family's presence for the season. Ventnor also had Assembly Rooms, one of the hallmarks of the spa towns. They were opened in Albert Street in 1879 and were the place where balls, theatre performances and other social activities were held. A number of the larger hotels, too, hosted balls and soirées from time to time. However, the kind of social parade that was once so central a feature of Assembly Rooms at the most fashionable spas was not to be found in Ventnor. The spa society of Jane Austen's novels, with its famous master of ceremonies, its social proprieties and gradations, its preoccupations with ostensible wealth and current canons of taste, is hardly to be seen. Most of the prominent eighteenth-century spas had been places of idle diversion first and health resort second, whereas Ventnor was very much the other way round. Promenading along Belgrave Road or along the Esplanade was primarily about gentle exercise and the inhalation of sea air. But even this could be constrained on inclement winter days. In the long dark evenings, the tendency of many visitors was to retreat to the privacy and comfort of lodgings. Here there were invalids' requisites to hand to soothe chesty coughs. Here, too, preparations were made for sleeping on sheltered verandahs or in rooms with doors that were kept open to the night air. Ventnor did have a choral society, established in 1860, that met weekly on Monday evenings, October to March, under its conductor, Mr. Edwin Le Mare. The Congregational Church ran a Psalmody class every Thursday evening in winter. There were, in other words, other means in winter for exercising lungs than promenading out in the open air. Occasionally, though, opportunities for outdoor entertainment on winter evenings did arise, as when the new pier was illuminated in November 1876. With the lively strains of the Band of the Volunteer Battalion of the

The Undercliff Assembly Rooms on Albert Street, later known as the Town Hall



Hampshire Regiment in the background, the local newspaper reported how sprightly promenaders made their way under a bright moonlit sky in the clear frosty air, the white crests of the waves beneath almost as clear as if it was day.

Finally, we might pause a moment to contemplate Gwilliam's 'dandies and smirking belles'. Perhaps it was a comment on the courtship rituals of young menservants seeking sweethearts among their female counterparts, although in most households where servants were employed such liaisons were expressly forbidden or frowned upon. It could hardly have been a description of the town's ordinary populace, for they typically had neither time or money to engage in fashionable display to qualify for such labels. Nor could it really be a description of the invalids who wintered in the Undercliff. However, a London court case of early 1866, reported in the *Times*, may afford a later echo of the type of behaviour Gwilliam was referencing. It involved a Mr and Mrs Batchelor who had stayed in Ventnor in 1864. A lady who visited the man and wife in the town stated in court that Mrs Batchelor's conduct was very indiscreet. She spent most of her time upon the sands flirting with any one she could get to flirt with her. Subsequently, she made the acquaintance of a gentleman by the name of Ponsonby and went with him to an inn at Croydon, staying there for over three weeks. Her husband was petitioning for divorce on grounds of adultery and the upshot of the case was that a *decree nisi* was granted. Mr. Batchelor had been a captain in Her Majesty's 73rd Regiment of Foot and his wife was the daughter of a gentleman. They had married in 1862 and lived together at various places in England and also abroad. They were therefore persons of some means and this is how they came to spend time in Ventnor, a resort frequented by members of a similar social class. Perhaps the husband had come in the face of illness? We will never know. But, in any event, Mrs. Batchelor had the leisure to associate with other men she came across in the town. Whether she was quite the 'smirking belle' is anybody's guess, but the capacity for '*liaisons dangereuses*' within such a social milieu was clear.



Elegant Edwardian women (perhaps a mother and her daughters) parade for a photograph on the western cliffs at Ventnor

VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH



A view looking west down the High Street. It is summer rather than winter, but the picture offers an arresting perspective of some of the lines of shops. There were yet more behind the camera and also in Pier Street and in Church Street beyond.

CHAPTER SIX

A SHOPPING PARADISE

In August 1859, the *Times* newspaper carried an advertisement for the sale of a millinery, drapery and ladies shoe business at Regent House in Ventnor High Street. It was described as 'established 18 years' and 'well situate in the rapidly improving town of Ventnor'. It boasted a double plate-glass front as well as an adjoining showroom. The story of Ventnor's shops is as extraordinary as it is intriguing. When the diarist Mark Norman arrived in the town in the summer of 1836, there were but two, one of which was in Ventnor Mill. By 1840, though, Granville, in his *Spas of England* was recording that the shops had become numerous. Indeed, by the close of the nineteenth century the town was judged to possess the best shopping on the entire Island, with two major thoroughfares, High Street and Mill Street (later Pier Street), packed almost throughout their entire lengths with retail premises. More significant, though, was not the number of shops *per se*, but the fact that many looked to a high class of clientèle. They were there to cater for the tastes and fashions of the Undercliff's many well-to-do visitors. The *Times* advert of 1859 is striking in this respect. The shop's plate-glass display windows were straight out of London's West End. Plate-glass was invented only in the 1830s and its use did not begin to become widespread until after the glass tax was lifted in 1845. That it was to be found in retail premises in Ventnor even by the 1850s illustrates how far the town's shopping had developed on the back of its rapidly rising fortunes as a health resort among the monied classes. We can pick up the story of these particular shop premises from a page in the *Isle of Wight Mercury* of October 23rd 1897. It was announced there that the Thurgood Sisters had opened a High-class Ladies and Children's Underclothing and Outfitting Establishment at Regency House, 33 and 35 High Street. All the latest fashions of the season were to be found displayed. Here you could buy cycling and yachting costumes, opera cloaks, sunshades, seal coats and fur muffs. All was offered under 'High Class West End Experience'. There were three Thurgood sisters, Emily, Edith and Elizabeth, all in their mid-twenties by the time of the 1901 Census. This means that when they arrived in Ventnor in 1897 they were exceptionally young women. The Census gives their place of birth as Lancashire, but it is plain from the advert that



The establishment belonging to the Thurgood Sisters is on the left hand side of this High Street view, a little way past the men standing on the pavement who seem to have caught the eye of the photographer.

they had worked in London for a time, acquiring experience of ladies and children's outfitting. The business was to prove a long-lasting one, the sisters not finally closing up their shutters until 1937.

The premises occupied by the Thurgoods after 1897 were far from the only ladies outfitter in Ventnor, for the remarkable Ventnor compendium, *Knight's Household Almanack* of 1889, by then in its 27th publication year and itself a barometer of the distinction of Ventnor shops, contained a full-page advertizement for Walter Hammond, 'Draper, Silk Mercer, Ladies' Outfitter, and Dress and Mantle Maker'. Hammond was described as from South Kensington, with a large staff of workers. Among them were a son and daughter, both born in Chelsea, and both assisting their father in the trade. The business, based at Providence House, 101 and 103 High Street, had a suite of elegant showrooms and 'three ample show-windows of plate glass'. The showrooms stretched back to almost sixty feet and behind them was a separate building containing workrooms. Hammond also dealt in millinery, offering 'the latest and most approved FRENCH and ENGLISH styles'. Alongside, he was sole agent for Isle of Wight Hosiery. Orders for morning wear were given as being promptly executed. It may seem a shade macabre to dwell upon it, but in a town where there were so many older and sometimes sick or infirm well-to-do visitors, failure in the observance of social conventions in apparel in the event of a person's death was unimaginable. This added

A SHOPPING PARADISE




This particular transaction related to a single breasted blue morning coat suit, made to order. Inclusive of lining, it cost Mr. Norris £2.

measurably to the business of the town's outfitters. In a not dissimilar vein, the wealthier among the Undercliff's visitors retained liveried servants and they, too, found ample provision among Ventnor's clothing establishments. Frank Trueman, in Church Street, a tailor, outfitter, hosier and hatter since 1843, advertized on his bill-heads that liveries were made to order on the premises by competent workmen. Indeed, the *Isle of Wight Mercury* reported the 1880s as seeing Ventnor experiencing some of the most prosperous winter seasons of any of the English resorts, somewhat confounding the comments of the local diarist Mark Norman and the evidence of bankruptcy among traders. The paper remarked that high-class families abounded, as did their coaches and their liveried coachmen. Ventnor had had its own carriage-building business since as early as 1853. E.L Martin's spacious premises on Albert Street boasted a commodious showroom where numerous beautifully finished vehicles were available for inspection. In his attached workshops, he had every facility for the manufacture, to pattern, of 'any and every class of carriage'. Those who did not wish to purchase vehicles could hire them from Jackman's, one of several posting establishments in Pier Street. The firm could provide coachman, groom and stable boy as part of their 'livery service' and there were horses available more or less on demand. It was reckoned that, in the 1880s, Jackmans alone had 80-100 horses on their premises. The horses were grazed in various meadows around the town.

The startling array of Ventnor's outfitters in the later nineteenth century was not just a reflection of the number of visitors who had ample means to expend on their attire. What it also demonstrated was that this was a

VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH


FOR HIRE—CARRIAGES OF EVERY DESCRIPTION.
 DRAGS, BRAKES, CHARS-A-BANC.
 LANDAUS, BROUGHAMS, PHÆTONS.
 PONY CARRIAGES, DOG CARTS, & C.
 FUNERAL CARRIAGES SUPPLIED



WELL-TRAINED SADDLE HACKS FOR LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.
 LESSONS GIVEN IN RIDING DAILY,
 GOOD HAND & SEAT GUARANTEED.
 WELL-KNOWN HUNTERS UP TO WEIGHT.


M^r Wallis ... December 1902

Dr. to HENRY BROWN,
Riding Master & Carriage Proprietor,
 DEALER IN HIGH-GLASS HORSES,
 32, HIGH STREET. & 10, PIER STREET, VENTNOR, I.W.



*See 10th Horse & 4 Landaus
 Cemetery £ 5 0 0
 Paid ...
 Henry Brown
 Dec 1902*

Superior Accommodation for Livery Horses. Spacious Loose Boxes and Lock-up Coach Houses.



Brown's posting establishment in the High Street would have been very familiar to Ventnor's well-to-do visitors. Here a hearse and a landau are being supplied for a funeral in December 1902

group that had ample leisure to wander about showrooms sampling the latest materials and viewing the latest styles. The measure of their leisure time also helped account for the numerous other types of establishment to be found on the town's main shopping streets. Giles and Ponder's Music Warehouse at 15, High Street, for instance, offered pianos and organs for sale or for hire. Also for sale were banjos, guitars, violins, ocarinas¹⁵, bows, strings and music cases. The Warehouse had on offer a wide collection of book and sheet music. They also provided a tuning service in any part of the district, the tuners described as having had large experience in London and elsewhere working with 'higher class Grand or Cottage Instruments of Broadwood, Collard, Kirkman, Brinsmead, and the best Foreign Makers'. Even so, this did not prevent one distinguished Ventnor convalescent from ordering in a piano direct from Chickering & Sons, of Boston, Massachusetts,

¹⁵An instrument consisting of an egg-shaped body, a whistle-like mouthpiece and finger holes.

A SHOPPING PARADISE

a company famed for the quality of its instruments. His name was Hans von Bulow, a distinguished concert pianist. Suffering from a stroke and general exhaustion, he came to stay at Tweed Mount on Bath Road between July and September in 1875.¹⁶

Visitors who were not musically inclined could instead visit Knight's library at 147 and 149 High Street where they could subscribe to borrow or purchase books. The establishment also offered plain and fancy stationery, artists' materials, etchings and engravings. There were, too, fancy goods of every description: 'leather, plush, and olive wood goods', for example, as well as the celebrated 'Linthorpe Ware', a type of art pottery then highly fashionable among the monied classes. Leisure hours could otherwise be spent at Mr. Thompson's photographic studio at Regent Parade in Mill Street. The medal-winning proprietor specialised in portrait and landscape photography, his establishment patronised by continental royalty and other distinguished personages. He was able to mount and frame all manner of pictures and views. Some of his work could be viewed at the annual photographic exhibitions put on at the Literary and Scientific Institution. Visitors with more active artistic dispositions could attend drawing and painting classes held there between September and July, at a cost of a guinea a term. This was part of a School of Art formed there from 1880, with connections to the Department of Science and Art in South Kensington. It was also possible to receive instruction at home or to attend upon teachers in their own residences in the town.

If we return to the pages of *Knight's Household Almanack* for Ventnor for the year 1889, there is another substantial category of shops in the town that reflect once again the wealth to be found among its visitors and residents. These were the grocers and provision merchants. Of course, few among the wealthier classes would have crossed their thresholds. That was left to housekeepers or other servants. But it is in the sorts of provisions and groceries that were advertized that we see evidence of the conspicuous wealth to be found in Ventnor and the Undercliff in season. Samuel Lane, at 118 High Street, styled himself as 'Grocer, Provision Merchant and Italian Warehouseman', the last label a classic hallmark of a high class grocer in the later decades of the nineteenth century. It meant that he dealt in finer kinds of groceries such as macaroni, vermicelli, dried fruits and other specialised items. Dear & Sons, at 5 High Street, had a department for Italian goods and another for foreign fruits. The business dated back to 1840 and prided itself as being at a level with the highest classes of Italian and French grocery

¹⁶I am most grateful to Sharon Champion for providing this remarkable piece of information

S. WILSON,
9 CHURCH STREET, VENTNOR, ISLE OF WIGHT,
WINE AND SPIRIT MERCHANT,
Tea Dealer, Family Grocer,
Italian and Provision Merchant,
BEGS TO CALL ATTENTION TO HIS
Choice Selection of **NEW SEASON'S TEAS,**
Coffee, Spices, and Foreign Produce,
Which he supplies at LONDON PRICES.

WINES AND SPIRITS.
Martell's, Hennessy's, and Courvoiser's Old Case Brandies.
Dunville's, Kinahan's, and other Irish Whisky,
Black and Ferguson, Lorne, and other Scotch Whisky.

WINES from the best Shippers.
AGENT FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE WINE ASSOCIATION.
Ind, Coope and Co.'s Romford and Burton Ales,
Bass Ale and Guinness' Stout. Ales and Stout in Bottle or Cask.

Here, in an advertisement in the local newspaper in January 1880, a Church Street grocer describes himself as an Italian and Provision Merchant, offering items for sale at London Prices. The entire advert conveys in an instant the kind of clientèle that favoured Ventnor's shops.

warehouses to be found in the West End of London. There was a vast assortment of teas, mineral waters, patent medicines and other proprietary articles for sale. There were also stocks of perfumes together with items for the care of the hair, teeth and skin. Surviving billheads tell much the same story about the town's high class grocers. Williamson & Treadgold had stores in London's West End and in Bournemouth, for example, as well as at 5, High Street in Ventnor. They were, among other things, specialist tea and coffee dealers, with a tea room where customers could sample the best flavours and blends. Finally, one cannot pass out of Ventnor's Victorian shopping streets without peering into the capacious shop and warehouse of Arthur J Potts at 13, Pier Street. Opened in about 1876, with a double-fronted window, it offered to visitors, according to an 1894 reference guide, 'every class of fashionable toilet, dinner and kitchen-ware, cut and plain table glass, recherché ornamental glass, and the productions of Royal Worcester, Minton's, Doulton's, Sèvres, Limoges, Dresden and other ware'. Here, once more, was Belgravia and Mayfair brought beside the sea. Here

A SHOPPING PARADISE

BOUGHT OF
Williamson & Treadgold
 High-Class Stores,
 CORNER OF COSY TEA ROOM


Telephones—
 BOURNEMOUTH 67
 WESTBOURNE 438

TEA & COFFEE DEALERS,
 WINE & SPIRIT IMPORTERS & PROVISION MERCHANTS.

14, 15 & 16, THE ARCADE, BOURNEMOUTH.
 1, SHAFTSBURY TERRACE, WESTBOURNE.

5, HIGH STREET,
Ventnor, Dec 8 1900

AS AGENTS
 LONDON & GRANTHAM,
 The Executors of the Late
 Hon. M^{rs} Pelham Sinclair



COFFEE
 Fresh from
 ROASTER,
 sent by post to all parts
 of the country.


TEA CAMELLIA
 as used in
 TEA ROOMS,
 IN LEAD PACKETS
 ONLY.

SOLE AGENTS
 FOR
 PORT ROYAL,
 3s per bottle, 4s per doz.

JAMS
 MADE IN SILVER
 PANS,
 from finest English Fruits

TOILET SOAPS
 Absolutely pure
 and delicately perfumed.
 2^d PER TABLET, 1s PER DOZ.
 HERBAL SKIN,
 3^d per tablet, 2s 6^d per doz.

Brought To'd	2	10	8 ^d
12 by Gelatine			7 ^d
12 1/2 loaf sugar	3	-	
3 pear soap			10 ^d
3 1/2 loaf sugar			4 ^d
1/2 Salad oil	2	3	
2 1/2 Barley			5 ^d
1 Coffee beans	1	10	
3 1/2 Cacao			9 ^d
2 Carbon Salt			11 ^d
		£	2 17 8



A wonderfully elaborate letter-head on a high-class tradesman's bill.

were goods that no ordinary inhabitants of the town could ever hope to buy. For most, they came from another world.

Ventnor's tradesmen as a whole were fortunate that their potentially busiest time of year, Christmas and New Year, was one when the town (as well as the Undercliff, generally) was invariably full with well-off visitors. The local newspaper, the *Isle of Wight Advertiser*, in December 1889, remarked that a walk around the town's shops betokened wealth in abundance. The most fastidious tastes and appetites were catered for almost without limitation. You could buy costly gems and expensive furs. There were costumes to satisfy

every wardrobe. In January 1888, Henry Field, a fashionable Gentlemen's Outfitter at 40 and 42 High Street, used the same newspaper to draw customers attention to his new season's assortment of scotch tweeds and cheviots, as well as West of England woollen goods of every description. Meanwhile, for Christmas fare, there were pheasants, turkeys and geese hanging in serried ranks outside every butcher's shop window. Among families who wished to entertain but had not the servants to assist, an 1894 reference guide, *Industrial Great Britain*, pointed out that they could engage the assistance of Mr. R. H. Tolman, a 'restaurateur, cook, pastry cook and confectioner' from High Street and Pier Street. He was reckoned to have an unsurpassed reputation as a refreshment contractor. Skilful cooks were available to 'dress dinners and turtles'. Mr Tolman was renowned, too, for his invalid soups. Then, for wines, spirits, ales and stouts, you could do no better than apply to Frederick Corbould's wholesale importing business in the High Street. According to the same 1894 guide, there were champagnes, hocks, burgundies and clarets to suit every pocket, while you could buy vintage ports from 1847 and 1834 for 192 shillings and 240 shillings respectively. A farm labourer around that date was lucky to earn 10 shillings a week, so these sorts of wines were far and away the reserve of a wealthy élite.

As Ventnor became more and more a haunt of the wealthy, one inevitably pauses to enquire more about the growing body of ordinary men and women who came to support them. When Gwilliam wrote in 1844 of Bonchurch mansions shedding their blessings on the neighbouring poor, he was alighting upon the monied class's need for a host of artisans, tradesmen and unskilled labour to support their mode of living. As the range of the town's shopping outlets developed over the course of the nineteenth century, so the range of ordinary employment grew. But Ventnor, of course, had few indigenous inhabitants and what happened is that the nascent town became a magnet for in-migrants from other part of the Island and from the mainland. Many came to be housed at Longdown and the Cow Leas in what one guide-book described as 'mean rows of poor dwellings'. North Street, South Street and St. Catherine Street were at the centre of this quarter of the town and a glance at the Census Enumerator's Returns tells the story of many of the people who lived there. In 1891, there were 30 or so women whose occupation was given as laundress. There were also laundry packers, laundry carmen and laundry boys. Ventnor had had a steam laundry since 1882, located in the heart of the town, well supplied with spring water. Some of these individuals may have worked there. However, a few almost certainly worked in hotel and lodging houses. It was also not uncommon at the time for women to 'take in washing' in order to supplement low household incomes. The same collection of streets had almost as many

A SHOPPING PARADISE

J. Corbould, Telephone 64 x.
Telegrams :
Corbould, Ventnor.
Wine and Spirit Importer
(Wholesale and Retail).
Licensed to supply any quantity of Wines and Spirits.
Trade Mark—MUTUAL. Established nearly 70 years.



OLD BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY
As sent to all parts of England and Exported to New York and Foreign Countries.
All Mineral Waters in Stock.
Ale and Stout Bottler, VENTNOR.
Price List on application.

A Corbould's advertisement from the early 1900s (left)

Pier Street looking north, with Tolman's Restaurant on the right. The date is the early 1900s and, in this view, it is plainly summertime (below).





St. Catherine's View from its seaward face. This was a terrace largely occupied by working class families. The reverse face was on St. Catherine Street.

dressmakers or seamstresses recorded in 1891. Some may have had formal employment at the various high-class outfitters in the town, but others may merely have taken in work on their own account. In other dwellings within this district, the 1891 Census records all manner of artisans: whitesmiths, carpenters, plumbers, masons, plasterers, painters and upholsterers, to name just a few. Then there were individuals in more menial occupations: gardeners, general labourers, grocers' assistants, errand boys and so on.

One of Ventnor's ordinary inhabitants recollected his youth in the town in the 1870s or 1880s in a local newspaper column of 1946. He remarked that the wide spectrum in wealth and in poverty did not seem to trouble the lesser members of the community. The different social groups seemed to jostle each other comfortably. The poorer members seemed to take pride in their simple achievements. Relatively speaking, Ventnor and the Undercliff probably presented greater opportunities for work than many other quarters of the Island or of the nearby mainland counties. It was the case, too, that charitable giving was powerful among Ventnor's well-to-do visitors, as well as among its more long term well-to-do residents. It was not just that they supported the treatment of consumption, whether at the Royal National Hospital or other sanatoria, but they also sought to aid the local poor. At several of the shops in the High Street and in Church



A servant group at Winterbourne, Bonchurch, circa 1900. Winterbourne was made famous as the place where Charles Dickens stayed in 1849. By the end of the century, it had been enlarged to become a small country mansion. Those who were employed in houses of this kind often regarded themselves among the aristocracy of ordinary working people.

Street, the better-off customers were invited to participate in 'Gift Meat', a way of enabling the poor to buy choice joints at Christmas at special low prices, offering shades of the modern food bank. The particular newspaper correspondent in question had been apprenticed to Mr Fletcher Moor, the newspaper publisher and printer. He had done 'seven years of drudgery in a cellar underneath the street level'. This was on the corner of Hambrough Road and Church Street. He had been required to work 65 to 75 hours a week with wages of just a shilling a day. Factory Act regulations were ignored. As a juvenile, though, he seems to have taken this experience in his stride. In any event, was it very different to the conditions in other trades? Compensations were found in such things as the annual circus visit when the performers pitched their tents in Dudley Road and, later, on land in

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Mitchell Avenue, the site of the present bowling green. In summer time, there was the prospect of bathing, though not on the main Ventnor beach where it was strictly regulated from bathing machines segregated between men and women and at prices way beyond the purse of ordinary folk. Instead, they would venture down to the little bay between Gas Works and Highport to the east, sometimes bathing without costumes and incurring the wrath of occupants of nearby dwellings. The Local Board debated the issue many times. For some observers it amounted to gross indecency; for others it was viewed as a longstanding custom and hardly to be complained of, that is as long as it was carried on more than 50 yards from paths or dwellings. One familiar response was that 'cleanliness was next to godliness'.

A SHOPPING PARADISE



Workers at Burt's Brewery in the 1880's. The company started in 1840 and survived until the early 21st-Century.



A view of Ventnor taken from the neck of the pier circa 1895. The resort's very distinctive topography is highlighted magnificently, while each and every building appears to make the most of the southerly aspect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

VENTNOR AND THE UNDERCLIFF IN SUMMER

The picture opposite is from one of those large glass plate negatives that represent the acme of late Victorian photography. The definition is so crisp and the consequent detail so great that a viewer can spend hours studying it and keep registering new details. One of the more fascinating is the stars and stripes that billows from the flagpole on the beach opposite Ribband's Queen's Hotel. Perhaps it is American Independence Day, or perhaps the hotel has a clutch of distinguished American visitors? The relative absence of people in the picture might lead one to think that it is relatively early in the day. Indeed, this is when many photographers of the time often chose to obtain their shots. Looking carefully at the shadows, though, it is clear that it is well after mid-day, perhaps even late afternoon. So why are the beach and the promenade so empty? There are no bathers, either, even though the sea is calm and there is sunshine. One clue may be the way the flag is flying. It reveals that the wind is easterly, as does the smoke from one or two of the chimneys on buildings along Belgrave Road. Parallel with the sea wall, though, there are outstretched ropes that are festooned with all manner of bathing costumes, in all shapes and sizes. So perhaps the bathers have been and gone. The picture is, of course, not one with which many of Ventnor's winter visitors would have been familiar. In summertime, Ventnor and the Undercliff became less a health resort and more a place of seaside holiday, especially for families and their children. The second beach picture (overleaf), which looks eastward at Ventnor, along the line of the Esplanade, shows some of them, the mothers in characteristic ankle length skirts or dresses, the daughters attired in knee-length frocks and the sons in shorts, the youngsters plainly the more comfortably attired for the seaside on a warm day. The two main flagpoles this time look to be flying the French tricolour on this particular day, though the breeze is light and onshore. The flags may indicate that it is Bastille Day, for this is a flag day that is still observed on Ventnor Esplanade in the twenty-first century.

Quite when Ventnor became a summer resort is not easily established. As early as 1852, though, Ventnor's Local Board was already regulating sea bathing by segregating the men from the women. By 1859, as we have already indicated, there was a prohibition on bathing without a machine. As time went by, more regulations ensued: it was, for instance, forbidden to change into a bathing costume in one's hotel or lodgings and then walk to the beach. In later years,

elegant striped tents began appearing to supplement the cumbersome bathing machines as a place in which to get attired for entering the sea, as the picture shows. But in 1894 the local Board had to remind all persons of the female sex when bathing that they should not approach within fifty yards of any area where men over the age of twelve were to be found. Even after the outbreak of World War I, the Town Clerk was moved to publish a notice in October 1915 admonishing the practice of persons not using a bathing machine, tent or shelter on Ventnor beach. In future, they were to confine themselves to the areas east of the pier and west of Undercliff House as far as the Steephill Castle harbour breakwater. Moreover, they were allowed to bathe only before 9 am and after 8 pm. This was at a time when, in many other English resorts, local bye-laws regulating bathing had for some years been steadily relaxed. In the south-west of England, for instance, mixed bathing had become commonplace by the very early 1900s.¹⁷ At Ventnor, though, the continuing measure of the old social proprieties makes clear that in summer the resort was still very much the haunt of the 'well-to-do', of members of the monied classes. In a way, this is hardly surprising, for the quality of the towns' winter accommodations, with their stylish furnishings and socially conscious proprietors would have remained beyond the reach of the purses of any other social group. Before the railway came in 1866, in any event, reaching Ventnor would have been an expensive journey. And even when the leading local railway companies began extensively to advertise summer fares from the capital, the costs were still considerable. When the Fleet Review took place at Spithead on 13th August 1870, even special day excursion tickets just to Portsmouth Harbour from London's Waterloo cost ten shillings second class by London and South Western trains. From London Victoria, there were cheap fast services right through to Ventnor via Cowes every Tuesday and Saturday that same August, with a range of tourist and family tickets that were valid for a month. You could leave on one of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway's trains at 10.30 am and be in Ventnor in just under four and a half hours. But fares for a family still represented far more than a week's wages for the ordinary working man, so that the trainloads that arrived at Ventnor's new high level station that summer were from among the professional and trading classes, part of the emerging Victorian bourgeoisie enjoying disposable income that had once been confined only to landed society.

The local newspaper reported on the scene on Ventnor beach in August 1870. It was a 'daily carnival', the promenade and shore crowded with visitors and the water's edge 'fringed with bathers'. By day, the Nassau Band offered

¹⁷See F. Gray, *Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Society and Nature* (London, 2005), pp. 156-161



Ventnor beach in the first years of the twentieth century, when bathing tents had started to supplement the cumbersome bathing machines.

'a continuous stream of comicality and harmony' while in the evenings the Band of the 5th Isle of Wight Rifle Volunteers played to the visitors. When the Royal Victoria Pier opened in the late 1880s, large paddle steamers, as we have seen, began landing day excursionists from the mainland in the summer season, adding to the already busy beach and promenade. On regatta days, many would be seen crowding the pier walkway, finely dressed men and women, unambiguously representatives of the 'better classes'. In other words, Ventnor in summer was no 'wakes week' resort, no holiday destination for ordinary working men and their families. A few south coast seaside towns came to be frequented by what some critics described as 'the vulgar classes', but Ventnor was not among them. Its social pedigree was too elevated and it was too far distant from the urban masses of the capital.

One singular feature about Ventnor in summer was a perception among some outsiders that, because it was a favoured winter resort, it must be impossibly hot over the months of June to September. Local guide-books repeatedly raised the question and were generally universal in stating that it was a fallacy, mere 'moonshine', as one put it. The moderating effects

on temperature of close proximity to the sea ensured that Ventnor and the Undercliff did not experience oppressive temperatures in a summer heat wave. The *Ventnor Red Book* of 1908 cited the example of the 1898 summer season: the temperature at the Greenwich Observatory had peaked at 92.1F, that at Osborne House at 89.0F, but Ventnor's highest value was a mere 78.3F. The resort did not have the bracing qualities of air found on eastern coasts in the summer season, but it often enjoyed an exquisite balm, by night as well as by day, that could not do anything other than contribute to enjoyment.

As much as one might be tempted to try to make comparisons between summer and winter in Ventnor, the reality was that they were each quite distinctive realms. In winter there were no daily paddle steamers to swell the number of visitors. There were few day visitors by train arriving from other Island resorts, or from the mainland. In summer, if you did not stay at one of the town's hotels or boarding houses, you could, of course, take apartments or a villa for the duration of the summer season. In the middle of May 1889, the St. Lawrence Rectory was advertised in the *Times* as available for rent for a period of six weeks that summer. It had three sitting rooms, seven bedrooms, stabling, tennis lawns, grounds over two and a half acres, kitchen garden with produce and two servants if needed. In July the same year, a not dissimilar property was offered in a 'fashionable locality' in Ventnor, underlining once more the elevated social station to which many prospective visitors belonged. Summer rentals were typically lower than rentals in winter, but one can never be quite sure whether this was directly a function of the basic laws of demand and supply or whether it reflected the higher 'wear and tear' that residence in winter invariably brought to any property, with, for example, open fires in almost every room ready to dirty and dull decorations and furnishings. Ultimately, winter visitors came to be more in the nature of semi-residents, with households effectively removed to Ventnor for the colder months, as well as for Christmas and the New Year. For summer arrivals, the resort signalled vacation, a life to be spent active and outdoors. These were, by and large, not invalids in quest of health, but, most commonly, families with children, much like those that populate the beach scenes captured in late Victorian photographic images.

Ventnor's 'winter season' was, as we have previously observed, generally thought to run from October through to April or May, but sometimes the evidence is not altogether so neat or clear-cut. On October 21st 1859, the *Times* newspaper carried a report of a young woman being rescued from near drowning on Ventnor's beach. She was bathing along with her sister and was caught by a ground swell that caused her to lose grip of the bathing rope with the result that she was swept into deep water. The

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The Crab and Lobster Hotel in a summertime view. To its right is the old Crab and Lobster Inn, festooned in creepers. The hotel was for many years run by Miss Cass and later became known as Cass's Hotel.

sister shouted to the shore for assistance and then, even though unable to swim, managed to maintain hold of her guide rope and plunge through the waves herself to seize her sibling's dress. Meanwhile, an eighteen-year-old lad had heard the cries for help and set about wading out to help the two women. However, he proved unaware of the steeply shelving shingle beach and was soon himself in difficulties. He found that he could do little more than save himself. Happily, he had been immediately followed into the water by a boy of 16 who, plainly more confident in the surf, managed to pull both women to safety where a local physician proved at close hand to revive the casualties. The incident is interesting because both women were using bathing machines at a time in the year (near the end of October) when one would normally have expected them to have been long since removed from the beach, safe from the effects of equinoctial gales and high spring tides. The newspaper remarked that the near drowning should serve as a lesson to bathers of the perils of a shingle shore where the descent could be sudden and the levels constantly shifting. It urged local authorities to ensure that proper attendants were available to remind incautious bathers of the dangers they faced. Otherwise, it continued, 'many weak and timid invalids' would be prevented from 'availing themselves of this delightful and invigorating exercise'. At Ventnor, it seems, complaints had already been made about the want of efficient guides, but the machine proprietors

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had failed to oblige. Whether the sisters concerned were in fact invalids is doubtful. It was far too late in the bathing season for anyone at all delicate in health to venture into the sea. What is more likely is that October 21st that year was one of those days, not at all uncommon across the Undercliff in autumn, when summer seemed to have returned.¹⁸ It enticed the sisters to bathe when perhaps the state of the tide and the sea would, on other days, have cautioned them. At the same time, it may be that machine proprietors saw profit in keeping their apparatus available for the early weeks of the winter season. It also added to the sense that Ventnor and the Undercliff had affinities with mediterranean shores, an escape from the trials of a normal English winter.

18. The month of October 1859 saw Ventnor record a maximum temperature of 70.0F, with a mean temperature for the complete month of 55.0F. It was among the warmest Octobers of that decade – see J.L. Whitehead, *The Climate of the Undercliff* (London, 1881)

VENTNOR AND THE UNDERCLIFF IN SUMMER



A fine view of a beach attendant using a capstan to haul a bathing machine clear of the water. The date is about 1870 and, from the limited depth of the shadows, it is probably mid-summer. Bathing costumes are hanging up to dry, hired along with the machines and their attendants.

VENTNOR - VICTORIANS IN SEARCH OF WINTER HEALTH



Ventnor in its winter season – a picture taken in either the early autumn or early spring of 1867. The clue is in the scant foliage on the few visible trees, the large number of smoking chimneys, and then the starkness of the front elevations of the buildings, signifyng that the sun is relatively low in the sky.

CHAPTER EIGHT

VENTNOR ALONGSIDE OTHER ENGLISH WINTER RESORTS

Ventnor and its Undercliff was among the later southern coastal districts to be transformed into winter resorts. Torquay, for example, had long stolen a march on it, one observer having stated, as early as 1817, that the town had been built largely to accommodate invalids in the colder months, or so Granville recorded in his account of 1841. Before the railways reached South Devon, steamboats were available that departed weekly from Cotton's Wharf on the south bank of the Upper Pool of the Thames, destined for Torquay. As long as the vessel was not running into a 'sou-wester', the passage was eminently more comfortable than the long journey overland on often indifferent roads, especially when autumn rains arrived. Eastward from Ventnor, the architect Decimus Burton had turned St. Leonard's on the Sussex coast into a resort that had shades of the grandeur of Bath's squares and crescents. As well as wealthy summer visitors, it became host in winter to wealthy invalids. Further east still, the port of Dover was developing a reputation as a place of winter residence, its new parades of lofty houses eminently fitted for 'patrician inmates', according to Granville. One informant described how there were balls and parties in the winter season, making for good society.

Ventnor's development as a winter resort really got under way in the 1840s. That was when many of the choicest sites began to be occupied. It was also at this time that Bournemouth started to become a highly favoured winter retreat among wealthy invalids. Indeed, Granville in 1841 held that it was superior to the Isle of Wight Undercliff as a winter residence for those having the most delicate constitutions. In particular, it was not exposed to easterly winds in the way that Ventnor was inclined to be. The valley of the Bourne and the glens of the Western Cliff had, according to Granville, balsamic qualities even in winter, a reference to the resort's legendary pine-scented airs. One might, then, have expected that Bournemouth's subsequent growth would have mirrored much that prevailed in Ventnor and its Undercliff, that is an expansion mediated by a frenzied invasion of external capital in anticipation of large and rapid

profits. However, Bournemouth was altogether different. It was an estate development, the possession of Sir George William Tapps-Gervis who commissioned an architect to design its villas and hotels and lay out some of its streets. It became a primary example of planned resort development. The contrast with Ventnor as an oasis of capitalist speculation could hardly have been starker.

Anyone familiar with the workings of capital in early Victorian Britain will quickly register that Ventnor was born at a time when speculative investment was reaching manic proportions in certain years. The new railways were its central focus, of course, but land acquisition and building formed an important subsidiary component. Ventnor and the Undercliff were in pole position as a focus of such investment in the wake of the dissemination of James Clark's famous eulogy about its mediterranean-like winter climate. At the same time, the facility in Ventnor for land to be sold off piecemeal, in separate building lots, played directly to the speculators. Thus, as London physicians began enquiring during the 1830s for accommodations for their consumptive patients, so the nascent resort was turned into an 'El Dorado', to borrow Mark Norman's legendary description. And, as we have seen, the *Times* newspaper became a major conduit for the transactions that fuelled the resort's expansion. The contrast here between Ventnor and Bournemouth was acute: over the 1840s, Ventnor registered 153 entries in the newspaper, Bournemouth a mere 25. Over the 1850s, the figures were 282 and 120, and by the 1860s, 911 against 436. At Bournemouth, there was not anything like the same scale of external ownership to generate the scale of property transaction that underpinned Ventnor's frequent entries in the *Times* columns. And even when one shifts the geographical focus to Torquay, although that resort registered five-fold the number of entries over the 1840s as did Ventnor, many take the form of shipping announcements and, where they do relate to property transactions, it is in Torquay itself, or in nearby Exeter, that the deals were more usually scheduled to be conducted. The plethora of Ventnor and Undercliff property sales handled in London auction houses or by London property agents is nowhere matched.

Ultimately, in other words, it is hard to deviate from the conclusion that Ventnor as a resort and, more especially, as a retreat for wealthy consumptives in search of winter health, was highly distinctive in its evolution, unambiguously a product of London-based economic and social capital. It was, indeed, a colony of the West End. We can once more remind ourselves of this if we take a wander along Pier Street at the time of the Census of April 1891. At number 27, Edwin Wright was recorded as a member of the London Stock Exchange. At number 29, John Williams, a hairdresser lived with his wife, son and mother, all of whom had London given as their place



Pier Street looking south one summer day in the early 1900s, with shops shaded by awnings, people animatedly going about their lives and several delivery waggons in sight. The card on which the photo is printed has been overwritten by a foreign visitor, reminding us how cosmopolitan Ventnor could be, whatever time of year.

of birth. At number 34, Ernest Wells was recorded as a dentist, his place of birth given as Hampton Court. Another hairdresser and his family lived at 34 Pier Street: Robert Fidler was 23 years of age, his wife 23 and young son just 2 years. The infant Fuller was born in St. George's in London, as was his father, indicating that the family had just recently migrated from the capital. At number 24 Pier Street was yet another hairdresser, although here styled 'Hairdresser and Perfumer'. This was Adolphus Enstroem, originally from Baden in Germany, but a naturalized British subject. His British wife had been born in St. Martin-in-the-fields and, living with them, were a sister-in-law and a nephew, one a dressmaker, the other a hairdresser's assistant, one born in St. Martin-in-the-fields, the other in Holborn. Pier Street at this time might as well have been designated 'Hairdressers' Row' such was the concentration of members of its profession there. But this may not have been the half of it, for, according to the Isle of Wight Mercury in 1905, there was a hairdressing business at 25, High Street, then known as Wood's Toilet Saloon, where a London hairdresser was given as in attendance. If, as Thomas Linn suggested, the visitor capacity of the town and its environs was around 6,000 at the time, it is hardly surprising to discover such an

PARIS HAIR MART.
PATRONIZED BY THE ROYAL FAMILY.

H. JOBLING, being the only person entrusted with the cutting and cultivation of the Royal children's hair, and sole manufacturer of the Royal Ambrosial Cream and Trichogenitor, so successfully applied during H.R.H. Prince Leopold's precarious health, respectfully informs the inhabitants and visitors of Ventnor, that at 3, SPRING HILL, he manufactures every kind of Ladies' Hair Dress to order, and supplies every article of celebrity for the Toilet.

N.B.—Hair gracefully cut, scientifically dyed, and restored from the most impoverished condition.

Agent for the *Isle of Wight Advertiser*.
OPPOSITE FIELD'S EMPORIUM OF FASHION,
SPRING HILL, VENTNOR.

Yet another sign of the high class of clientèle that frequented Ventnor is this advertisement for a Paris Hair Mart at the bottom of Spring Hill indicating royal patronage

array of hairdressing professionals, many ostensibly from the capital. They were a logical counterpart to the spectrum of high class shopping outlets that lined Ventnor's principal streets. Here, once again, was London's West End, or Mayfair or Belgravia, brought beside the sea.



An autumnal scene at Puckaster Cottage in the 1860s. Puckaster was built in the classic 'cottage orné' style in 1824. Situated towards Niton Undercliff, three miles west of Ventnor, it was an area thought to have just as salubrious a winter climate.