

In 1993, the late Fred Nobbs recalled to the late Fay Brown how, when the circus was camped out in a field in Upper Ventnor between the Wars, keepers would daily take the elephants down to the slipway on the east side of the Pier. Here they would have fun 'sucking up the water'. It is very hard today to imagine such animals being taken up and down Ventnor's hilly streets. It must have caused disruption for vehicles, but then traffic at the time bore little relation to the levels that are characteristic today. It was, of course, an age without the 'health and safety' regulation with which we are so familiar today.

It seems that visiting circuses were then a common feature of the town through the 1920s and 1930s. They were typically held in a field off of York Road, or else in a field near the top of Down Lane. Before the development of Upper Ventnor, circuses were held down in the town itself. In July 1874, the nationally famous *Batty's Circus* was set up in Cowleaze Field at High Port, just below Madeira Road. Dudley Road was a common location for circuses in the 1880s - on the area later used for tennis courts. Another favoured site for visiting circuses was in a field nearby *Macrocarpa* on Newport Road. This may be the area now occupied by Ventnor Bowling Club. In 1899, a *Steam Circus* was held on the 'fairground' site in St. Boniface Road. This was likely where the new school was opened in 1905.

In June 1923, the *Isle of Wight Mercury* offered a detailed account of the coming visit of *Broncho Bill's Great Wild West Exhibition & Mammoth Circus* to be held in Upper Ventnor in the month of July, with performances at 3 pm and 8 pm. There were some 60 horses, elephants and other animals, along with a 'troupe' of Japanese 'artistes', said to exhibit great skill and daring as acrobats. There were clowns and mimics to add to the entertainment, together with a brass band. A subsequent note in the *Mercury* recorded that some 2,000 people attended the performances in total. Rather earlier, in August 1890, some 200 audience members at a Ventnor circus performance fell into the ring when part of the seating collapsed, but there was no mention of any significant injury to any of them.

The town inhabitants who went to the circus seem to have been drawn largely from the lower social orders. Bart Russell, writing in the *Mercury* in 1946, observed that it was the event that ordinary folk always looked forward to: it helped to relieve the drudgery of work, which in Russell's case was seven years as an apprentice in the cellar quarters of Fletcher Moor's printing office on Church Street.



The picture shows elephants from Batty's Circus cooling off in the sea at Southsea, east of Clarence Pier in the 1930s. It was perhaps the same animals that Fred Nobbs recalled in the sea at Ventnor. Picture from *Portsmouth Evening News*

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre