



## Fred Nobbs, a great *raconteur*



The scene is the Terminus public house early in 1995 with a group of older local men enjoying a drink together. They were likely reminiscing about younger days and one of them, Fred Nobbs, second from left, had a reputation as a very lively *raconteur*, with a superb memory of 'how things used to be', once enthralled Fay Brown with an expertly detailed enumeration of Ventnor's shops between the two world wars. This article will explore Fred's story.

Fred was born at 80 Albert Street in 1910 and attended the National School on that street, taught by F.J.J. Macey. He was the son of Frederick Nobbs, a 'four-in-hand' coachman who worked for Jackman's Livery Stables located at the top of Pier Street, the site of the present Co-op store. Driving in some shape or form seems to have been in the

blood, for the young Fred started driving a motor vehicle when he was only 15 and a half. In fact, he may have had a few trials before that, for he helped Reg Newnham on his milk round and Reg, in the early 1920s, had a Ford model T (a so-called 'Tin Lizzie'). By the age of 16, he was driving a charabanc named 'Pride of Ventnor' that belonged to Bill Bates whose parents ran the Globe Hotel on the High Street. It was not long before Fred became a regular driver for Bill Bates, Bill having assembled a fleet of four coaches by the early 1930s. The most popular job was taking a 'Round the Island' tour. Fred's weekly wage for that was 30 shillings (£1.50 in today's money). When Bill Bates sold out to Crinage's coach company in early 1937, Fred transferred to Crinage's as well, ending up working for that firm for some 50 years, ultimately becoming manager of their Church Street garage.

Casting one's eye over Fay Brown's many notes of conversations with Fred in his final years, one is once more reminded how so many local men had nicknames. There was 'Soldier' Harvey, 'Darkie' Nunes, 'Beau' Wheeler, 'Twit' Groves, 'Buff' Brown, 'Stump' Dennes, and 'Drummer' Drake, for instance. One can guess the origin of some names but not others. Fred also recalled to Fay how one of the early charabancs he drove, a Daimler, had a ladder at the rear to enable passengers to board it. The bodies of these conveyances had ash frames and metal panels and some were the work of local coach builder, Frank Sivell. In the early days, most had solid tyres which made for a hard ride, but by the later 1930s, pneumatic tyres were becoming common, giving more comfort and better roadholding. The first proper saloon coach in Ventnor was operated by Percy Randall who had a booking office next to the Mill Bay.

Fred Nobbs loved his working days and he was out driving his car until three weeks before his death in November 1998, aged 87. In 1957, he had married Suzanne White of St. Lawrence and they had a daughter, Debbie, a few years later.

The other men in the picture are Fred Blake (left), Douglas Tharle (second in from right) and Walter Brown (right), Fay Brown's husband.

*Ventnor & District Local History Society*: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, especially the local history index of the late Fay Brown. Colin Beavis assisted in confirming identities of the men.



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