



## From Prison Cell to Council Chamber

Philip Bagwell and his wife Nell ran a newsagent's at 74 Ventnor High Street for 52 years, from 1906 to 1958. During the First World War, Philip could have applied for exemption from military service on the grounds that he had a business and family to support, but he was a man of sincere religious beliefs and chose instead to be conscripted and then declare his 'absolute conscientious objection' to the war. He refused to put on a uniform, or serve in a non-combatant role, and was court-martialled, found guilty, and served two and a half years in prison.

His daughter Joan recalls the day he was arrested: *I remember 2nd December 1916 as a dry and sunny day when we walked with Father to the clock at the corner of Pier Street, then by Windy Corner, the Marine Hotel and the Royal Hotel and into Park Avenue. We went all along Park Avenue until we came to the far gate entrance to the Park. There we stopped, said 'Good Bye' to Father and watched him cross the road and climb up the chalky path to Ventnor Town Station. I was five and a half, Gwen was four and Philip two and a half. . . Mother of course was looking after the shop. . . We learnt later that as we walked along to the park that morning a policeman was walking along the other side of the road, as though he had nothing to do with us, but in fact Father was under arrest and the policeman had to accompany him to the police court at Newport where the army would try to make him into a soldier.*

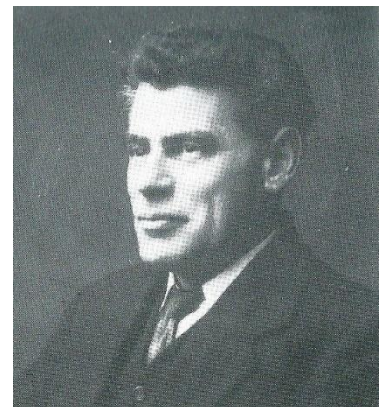


A family photograph which Philip had in his prison cell. It shows wife Nell (left) with son Philip, grandma Hannah Bagwell, daughter Gwen (back) and Joan (front) and Auntie Daisy.

Philip's wife Nell kept the shop running while he was away, struggling to manage the business without him, working long hours, and making the best of a difficult situation. For example, when the wartime ban on the sale of fireworks was lifted on the Wednesday following the armistice, there was a mighty rush to buy. Nell got the old stock down from the top shelf and wrote to Philip: *they looked shockingly damp and were mouldy, with some of the stuff coming through. . . we dried some indoors, rubbed them up, and no one has complained, and by the reports (no pun intended) they immediately 'go'.* Presumably the 'drying indoors' had to be done in front of an open fire!

That last winter was in many ways the most difficult. A second flu epidemic swept the country and the family caught it badly, including Nell, the two girls, 'Auntie' Daisy who helped with the children and Miss Lardi the shop assistant. Somehow they managed, but Nell wrote: *I felt we have come to the end of our strength of endurance at home. . . I lay in bed and thought I heard you come in and decided I dare not let you kiss me.* Philip was released from prison on 9 April 1919. In May that year he received a buff envelope addressed to Pte Bagwell 74 High Street, Ventnor, Isle of Wight. The letter inside was from the War Office, summing up his military service as: 30942 Private Bagwell served to the colours in the Dorsetshire Regiment for 2 years and 163 days. There was an added comment: *According to records in my possession, character indifferent.*

Conscientious Objectors were disqualified from voting for five years after the official end of the war (August 1921) - but there was nothing to stop them from standing for election, which Philip did in 1924, putting himself forward to serve as a Councillor on the Ventnor Urban District Council. Opinion in the town was sharply divided. A banner was slung across the High Street, a few yards from the Bagwell shop, reading *Vote to Keep the Conchy out*, but Bart Russell, the influential editor of the Mercury, wrote: *When a man is so maligned as he has been, the Englishmen's spirit of fair play asserts itself.* When the result was read out from the balcony of the Town Hall to a crowd of over a thousand, Philip was one of the six elected. A reporter noted: *there was a distinct pause before Mr Bagwell's name was given out. . . when the company heard it there was very loud cheering from a body of people right in front of the Town Hall. . . while from the back came a good deal of booing.*



Philip Bagwell worked as a town councillor for 24 years; the photograph here shows him in 1930. A large part of his time was devoted to housing matters, in particular establishing a housing policy for Ventnor, which resulted in the erection of the first council houses on Newport Road in Lowtherville. In the 1929 Ventnor Council Elections the Mercury noted: *His enthusiasm for the Council's housing scheme, his fair and consistent advocacy, broke down opposition in many quarters when one realised his downright sincerity for better conditions and a healthy environment.* From 1952 to 1958 he served as Ventnor County Councillor.

In 1958 he was diagnosed with cancer. He wound up the business and sold the shop on 26 July 1958, and died at home a week later.

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#), Information from our collection, and thanks to Joan Lawle and Philip S Bagwell for extracts from their book *Prison Cell to Council Chamber*.