



A Ventnor character: Miss Olivia Parkes



This week's article is in response to a request from a reader for the story of 'Britannia'.

Colin Brown, as a young lad in Ventnor in the later 1930s and 1940s, knew her as 'Nell Gwyn'. In later years, she was almost always known as 'Britannia'. She became nationally famous for living in a house on stilts on the beach just west of Ventnor, once known as 'Apple Annie's Cabin', later as 'Britannia's Hut'.

Olivia Parkes was the daughter of a Walsall ironfounder. She came to Ventnor in 1919, opening a sweet shop at 32 Pier Street. She subsequently bought one of the huts on the Eastern Esplanade, selling from it as well as sleeping in it, even though neither practice was permitted. In summer, she used to be seen selling oranges and other fruit on the beach, hence the name 'Nell Gwyn', after Charles II's mistress who, before she became legendary, plied oranges to fashionable audiences in London's new playhouse theatre. The shop on Pier Street was, according to the young Ron Pusey, always well-stocked, a large piano affording a continuation of the counter. She billed herself as 'Britannia Olivia', offering high class confectionery and tobacco, Ron in turn referring to her as 'Madame Olivia'. From time to time he took errands and was rewarded with a threepenny bit and some old stock chocolates that were a bit fousty, but alright to eat if you wiped them off, or so 'Madame' used to claim.

The house on stilts was built for Ventnor Swimming Club in the early 1880s. Olivia Parkes purchased it sometime in the later 1920s and was living there in November 1931 when several nights of severe storms washed away her wooden steps and appeared to threaten to sweep the entire structure into the sea, the Fire Service eventually coming to her rescue. Despite this, she returned to live there, including during wartime, not leaving till forced to do so in 1958, by that time well into her seventies.



As the years passed, she became a source of almost endless fascination among holidaymakers. The precarious wooden hut had no water supply, no sanitation, and by the 1950s, was in advanced decay. When part of the roof gave way, she erected a tent inside as protection from weather. Visitors would sometime wait to catch a glimpse of her stepping out on to the rotting balcony, with its fourteen wooden steps to the beach. Mostly, though, she ventured out for food and a newspaper when there were few people about. Joan Marven, in a letter to the County Press in 2005, remembered her in the 1930s as 'a somewhat rotund lady, dressed in shapeless dark clothing and hat', carrying 'a large wicker basket'. Upon her re-housing in 1958, a national newspaper picked up the

story of her incredible abode. A grainy photograph showed her perched on the hut's balcony: 'The Old Lady of the Sea'.

Michael Freeman, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](http://www.ventnorhistory.com), from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, including those of Fay Brown. Thanks to Sharon Champion for the photograph of the house on stilts.