



Ventnor beach scene in summer 1923



When one first looks at this group photograph of 100 years ago, the first instinct is just how modern it appears. Edwardian and late Victorian proprieties of dress appear to have been swept well aside. Women in bathing costumes are mixed with men similarly attired and the entire group seems wholly relaxed whilst posing for the photographer. A few of the old bathing machines that were once trundled to the water's edge seem to have been parked up by the sea wall and there appear to be no changing tents on the beach itself. The picture could almost have been taken some 30 years later. It is the hats, though, that mark the date as 'twenties'.

This was all a far cry from less than ten years earlier. In October 1915, the Town Clerk announced that anyone wishing to bathe without using a machine, tent or shelter, had to do so east of the pier and then only before 9 a.m. and after 8 p.m. This restriction applied also to the shoreline extending from Undercliff House (now the Spyglass) to the Steephill Castle harbour breakwater. The Clerk's announcement seems to have been in response to a rise in townsfolk engaging in nude bathing (invariably described at the time as committing 'acts of indecency'). This was actually nothing new, for since at least the early 1850s, the Ventnor Local Board had frequently (and in varying ways) found the need to regulate the way bathing was undertaken, most of all due to the sensitivities of the class of visitors that was by then frequenting Ventnor shores. Ladies wishing to bathe were then strictly segregated from the gentlemen, and there were attempts to ban all bathing on Sundays.

Ventnor seems to have made the transition to peacetime, following the Great War, with a sometimes startling relaxation of other social proprieties, too. A young wife who arrived in the town in 1924, with her husband and young infant, was led to believe that no landlady would consent to accommodate them. However, she found a place in a hotel right on the seafront where the landlady adored small babies. The hotel was described as 'posh', which probably means that it was the *Metropole*. The same young wife remarked how the beach that summer was full of little children with buckets and spades, with all the mums sporting colourful Japanese style parasols. This was yet another far cry from the black umbrellas that had traditionally been the means of affording shade from the summer sun. This was the backcloth against which Olivia Parkes (aka 'Britannia') was soon repeatedly flouting Sunday trading laws, selling sweets from her Pier Street shop and oranges on the beach. The fines accumulated were easily covered by her takings on busy summer days.

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



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The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

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