



From Florist to Calves Foot Jelly

One of my most valued books (lent to others under strict conditions) is called 'How Buildings Learn'. I bought it because the title intrigued me and I have been dipping into it and enjoying it for the past twenty years, It has encouraged me to photograph buildings that stand out from their surroundings, looking as though they had no right to be there. Such was the impression I had when I first saw St John's House, the curved building at the top end of Madeira Road/Trinity Road. There it was, brick built, a faded, yellowing, white with a front door that opens out to a rounded aspect. Its Trinity side is now St John's Flats, neat and tidy. Its Madeira side has a crumbling wall, showing its age. Neither side having little in common with its stiffly correct Victorian styled neighbours.

St John's House was built around 1850. Sale documents and advertisements reveal a journey with a great many changes. The first occupier we hear of is Mr B.C. Stuart Mackenzie, a florist and seedsman trading in 1867. With the arrival of the railway in Ventnor, it must have seemed an excellent opportunity for business.

In 1875 the character of the house changed considerably. It was divided into two houses. The main one functioned as a large shop with five rooms. A Mr W.Y. Brown, Estate Agent, who had settled in Ventnor in the 1860s to be a teacher at the Literary and Scientific Institution (now the Library), rented it for £35 annually. Having access to the roof with its access to sea views must have been a great attraction. In 1881 it was in the sober hands of George Amis and family, a grocer who did not stay long but went to seek his fortune by going to New York in 1889. Mr T. H. Loosemore then purchased the building and premises and, seizing the moment, decided to build a small shop on the opposite corner.

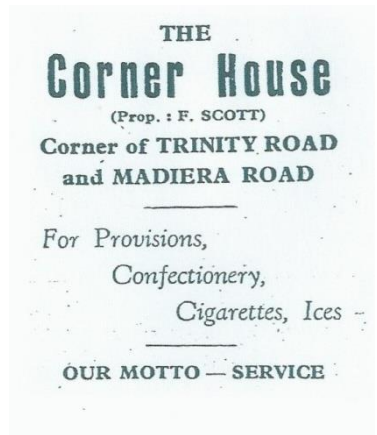


Then along came the ambitious Mr T Hamilton Urry, Solicitor, who decided to raise the status of the building by re-naming it St John's Chambers. In 1900, it was auctioned as a 'Suite of Excellent Offices,' along with 'The Excellent Corner Shop,' with the whole at the letting value of £45 per annum.

In 1905 St John's House took a deep breath and settled down in the comfortable arms of Mr Frank Parker, a bachelor, and his three unwed sisters who arrived to open a shop selling a range of table delicacies. Miss M Parker seems to have been the one who took charge and her name appears on the early advertisements. To announce their arrival and give the public a taste of what was to come she writes:

'St John's House, Ms Parker wishes to inform the Gentry and Public of Ventnor and neighbourhood that she has opened the shop at the above address, with a selection of Pure Home-made Table Delicacies, Home Potted Beef, Potted Shrimps, Potted Lobster all made fresh every morning. Calves Foot Jelly for invalids a speciality. Mincemeat, Plum puddings for 1/-. Orders by post receive prompt attention.'

Along with all the delicious smells the house now enjoyed, it is given a new name of 'THE CORNER HOUSE', just legible above the striped awning in the photograph above. Miss Margaret Milne Parker will be remembered by older Ventnor residents as she was listed as still living there in 1951, although the shop was then run by Mrs F Scott whose provisions reflect the different culture of the time, as shown in the photograph and advertisement here. It then passed into the hands of a Mr and Mrs T.H. Lewis in 1958. From 1989 through until 2003 the records show it being sold off or auctioned in separate flats or maisonettes.



Whether House, Chambers or Flats, the building remains attractive and causes people to ask about its unusual appearance. At roughly 165 years old it's an elegant survivor.

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