



Esperanto in Ventnor

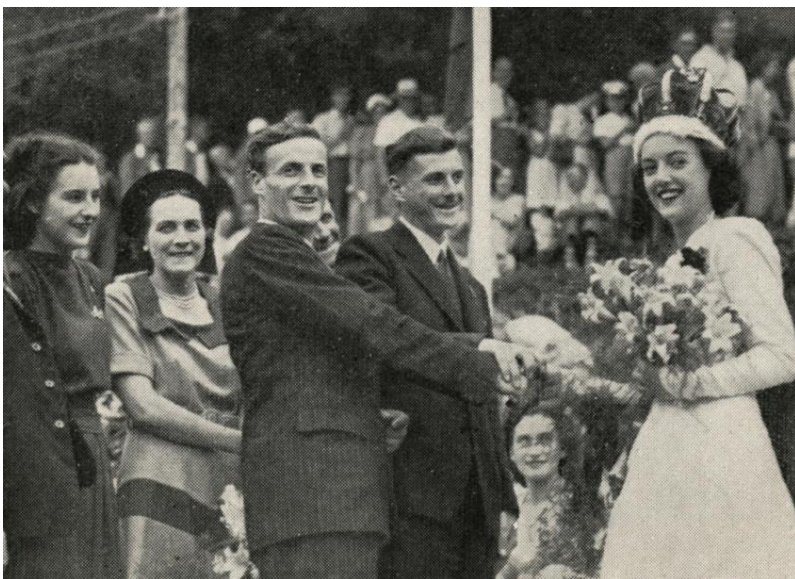


In September 1905 the Isle of Wight County Press reported that: *Captain Von Herbert . . . is desirous of forming a society in Ventnor for the study of Esperanto—for its own sake as well as providing an excuse for affording opportunities for social intercourse. Being an accomplished linguist himself, he undertakes to learn Esperanto in three hours, but the ordinarily intelligent Englishman ought to master it in three weeks or month . . . The Captain says the knowledge of Esperanto would be of immense value to lodging-house keepers catering for foreign visitors. However, he has fears of the ambitions of Islanders in the direction indicated.*

Esperanto (meaning *one who hopes*) is an artificial language invented to enable international understanding, and intended, like the airship on this Esperanto Society poster, to effortlessly

overcome national frontiers. An Esperanto Society was duly set up in Ventnor in 1907 and in 1908 they were offering lessons every Tuesday afternoon, at five o'clock, at St Wilfrid's Schoolroom, with visitors invited to join at a fee of 3d per lecture. The Chair of the Society, Dr Victor Blake, lived in Alpine Road and may have been a doctor at the Royal National Hospital; his wife Amy was also a member. Their instructor was Captain Frederick Von Herbert himself, who was a man with a fascinating background. He was Anglo-German, born in 1860 on board a British vessel in North Sea and brought up largely in Germany. Seeking adventure, when he was seventeen he joined the Turkish Ottoman Army for two years, later writing his best known book *The Defence of Plevna, 1877, Written By One Who Took Part In It*, a vivid and engaging account of his Turkish experiences.

Von Herbert found his way to the Isle of Wight in the 1880s, marrying Henrietta Nobbs, the daughter of a Newport estate agent, in 1884. She seems to have lived with her parents while her husband continued his Balkan travels, and while he served as a Captain in the British Army during the Boer War. General Sir John French described how during that war he was inspecting a fortified river crossing and remarked to the officer in charge that: *It brought to my mind a book I had read and re-read, and indeed studied with great care and assiduity - a book called 'The Defence of Plevna' by a certain Lieutenant Von Herbert, whom, to my regret, I had never met.* To French's undoubted amazement, the officer replied: *I am Von Herbert.* The last mention I have found of this intriguing man is a newspaper report that in Newport in August 1914 he was remanded on his own recognisances on a charge of failing to register as an alien. *He declared that he was not a German, but a Britisher, having fought for Britain in South Africa, and he positively declined to register as an alien.* Sadly, I don't know what became of Von Herbert, but the Ventnor Esperanto Society does not seem to have survived WW1.



However in the 1930s Ventnor had another enthusiast: Stanley Saunders, a stonemason with an interest in Esperanto. The Mercury described him as having spent his 20s in Australia *enjoying a variety of occupations which considerably broadened his outlook on life*, and said he was mainly responsible for introducing the language to the town, and Stanley and his wife Agnes, a journalist, named their house in St Boniface Road *Esperanto*. They moved to Sydney Lodge in Bath Road, where in the 1940s Agnes offered lessons in *Pitman's Shorthand practical experience - Secretarial and journalistic also type-writing*, while Stanley ran a 'Opal Mart', selling and exchanging semi precious stones. After WW2 he chaired the local United Nations Association.

Our final Ventnor Esperanto story comes from the first Ventnor Carnival after the war, when in 1949 the popular and symbolic star of the Carnival procession was a 20 ft

wooden boat named *Nova Espero* which means *New Hope* in Esperanto. Colin and Stan Smith were brothers from Yarmouth who worked at Saunders Roe in Cowes, and had served in the RAF Volunteer Reserves in Canada. In the summer of 1949 they returned to Canada, built the *Nova Espero* which they had designed themselves, and sailed her back to England across the Atlantic in 49 days. Our photograph shows the brothers surrounded by their family shaking hands with the Carnival Queen, Hazel Maynard.

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#), using information from our archives and UK Census and GRO information. Thanks to Bill Chapman from the Esperanto Society for the airship poster and information about the 1907 Ventnor Esperanto Society.