



Ventnor beach by Wickenden & Co



Following on from last week's article which looked at the story of Wickenden & Co., Ventnor photographers, we examine one of their larger pictures. It is instantly recognisable as the eastward end of Ventnor Beach. It is plainly a summer's day, as many of the French doors and sash windows of the Hotel Metropole are wide open. The tide is way out and a father and son can be observed walking along the base of the beach slope, just away from a long pool of water that has been left by the ebbing tide. In the bottom left of the picture, there appears to be a large mass of seaweed. We have no date for this particular picture, but the style of the overprint lettering suggests that is after the Great War, probably early 1920s.

With a little more detective work, we can try to justify this date further. It can be seen that the lower verandah of the Metropole is enclosed on its left hand side and this alteration can be dated to 1909. However, look in the middle of the photograph along the long line of bathing machines and you can see that there are six huts close together in a row that look exactly like those that are on the beach today. In this picture, three have their doors open and a longshoreman can just be seen in the act of unlocking and opening the other three. In the early years after the War, there was a dramatic relaxation of social proprieties over bathing. In particular, men and women were no longer required to be segregated and it had ceased to be the case that you could enter the sea only from a lowered bathing machine. So the huts you see in front of the Esplanade wall became changing rooms and, as most locals will know, the huts you see in the photo are the same huts you see today. All of them are cut-down bathing machines. It is testament to the quality of the original timber that they have survived so long, albeit with repeated repair. Just to the right of these huts, one can make out three 'changing tents', still with their front flaps closed. These were another post-1918 innovation. Later photos show that there were far more tents than can be seen here. It was yet another sign that the restrictive beach etiquettes of the Victorian generations were fading fast.

One slight puzzle in this photo is the small wooden breakwater that is visible in the left foreground, with a man and a woman sitting on the seaward end. Perhaps it was for use by small boats, or perhaps even for the motor launches that offered trips in the bay.

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



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

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

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