



VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



Ventnor's Department Store



This image comes from the late Fay Brown's album collection and shows the staff of Sharpe's department store on Ventnor High Street. There are 13 members posing for the camera and, judging from the nature of the window displays, the occasion appears to have been the forthcoming Coronation of George VI and his Consort, Queen Elizabeth, on 12th May 1937.

The store itself had been founded in 1893 in part of the newly-constructed Clarence Buildings situated on the south side of the lower end of Ventnor High Street. The business was established by Alfred James Sharpe who had already spent 13 years in Ventnor at Linfield's drapery store on the corner of Market Street and High Street. Within a few years of its opening, Sharpe's had become one of the most popular and liberally patronised trading concerns on the town's high street. It offered a comprehensive range of drapery goods, haberdashery of every kind, as well as all the latest London and Paris fashions in dress and millinery. Like the large West End stores that it sought to mimic, there was a heavy emphasis on the effective display of goods, both in the windows and within the store itself. In turn, the layout of the store, which extended over two floors, was carefully divided into departments, each with their own counter staff. This may sound trite to some readers today, but it was a novel arrangement in retailing over the final decades of the nineteenth century, as was the attaching of visible price tags on nearly all items displayed. There is a wonderful piece in A.J. Cronin's famous novel, *Hatter's Castle*, that records the indignation of the old-fashioned hatter, James Brodie, when he sees a new competitor opening up next door, one of its windows crammed from floor to ceiling with hats of every conceivable form, variety and style, every article bearing a small ticket with the price stamped in plain red figures. For Brodie, it was 'trashy and new-fangled'. But it was the future and, ultimately, proved the death-knell to his business.

Sharpe's department store long outlived its owner. Alfred James died in 1953 aged 86, but the business carried on trading until 1982, by which time it had grown to occupy 16, 18 and 20 High Street, the latter unit acquired in 1969, once the former Chocolate Shop. You can read all about life in the store in the 1960s in two articles that appeared in the SW Chronicle in July 2015, available on the Heritage Centre website. Their title was 'Are You Being Served?', inspired by the BBC Sitcom of the same name.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre. If any readers can identify any of the people who feature in the photo, please let us know.



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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