

VENABLES' GUIDE TO THE ISLE OF WIGHT

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Edmund Venables was born on 5th July 1819, the third son of William and Ann Ruth Venables (née Fromow). William Venables was a wealthy London paper-maker and stationer who became Lord Mayor of London in 1828 and Radical M.P. for the City of London 1831/1832. Ann Venables was the daughter of Peter Fromow of Newport, Isle of Wight with Huguenot origins.

Following education at Merchant Taylors' School, he became a scholar at Pembroke College Cambridge in 1839. He obtained a B.A. degree in Classics in 1842, an M.A. degree in 1845, and an *ad eundem* degree at Oxford in 1855.

In Cambridge, Venables became a founding member of the Cambridge Camden Society (later called the Ecclesiological Society) which had the object of promoting the study of "Gothic Architecture and of Ecclesiastic Antiquities". He became a member of the Royal Archaeological Society in 1845 and contributed many papers, including one in 1872 on the Dissolution of Alien Priors in the Isle of Wight in the reign of Edward 1. He was ordained Deacon in 1844 and Priest in 1846 and was Curate of Hurstmonceux in Sussex from 1844 to 1853. Whilst here, he married Caroline Mary Tebbs, the daughter of Henry Tebbs, Proctor in Doctors' Commons. They eventually had a family of six daughters and one son.

Edmund Venables arrived as a Curate in Bonchurch in 1853. His Rector was the Rev. R. Hilton Scott, in post 1853 to 1855. Working conditions for the clergy would not have been onerous. Venables is known to have conducted eleven baptisms and six funerals between 1854 and 1855.

He lived in a substantial villa called "Hawthorndene" built as a gentleman's residence in the 1830s and one of the larger properties in Bonchurch. For many years it operated as the Bonchurch Manor Hotel but is now a private residence under its original name.

In 1855, he resigned as Curate but remained living in Bonchurch. It was frequently the custom for clergymen with academic interests to have pupils "reading with them" and eventually Venables established a small school for boys. In an 1859 Directory for Bonchurch, there is an entry "Hawthorndene. Rev. E. Venables schoolmaster". He still carried out duties at the Church including four baptisms between 1855 and 1860, and six funerals, between 1855 and 1867, the last two after he left Bonchurch in 1864.

In 1860, Edmund Venables produced his *Guide to the Isle of Wight*, published by Edward Stanford of 6, Charing Cross, to join the burgeoning number of island guides which were appearing almost every year. His *Guide* was different. It was much longer than the others, with 526 pages. It was hardly a

guide for tourists - more like an encyclopaedia on the Isle of Wight.

The ambitious aims of the new *Guide* are set out in the grandiloquent title on the inner front page:

"A Guide to the Isle of Wight its approaches and Places of Resort with numerous Walks, Drives and Excursions and a General synopsis of the topography - Agriculture - Products and Manufactures - Local Affairs, Civil and Religious - Antiquities - History - Geology - Zoology - and Botany. By the Rev. Edmund Venables M.A. and Eminent Local Naturalists".

Venables acknowledged that there had been many books before on "directing the tourist to the chief beauties of the Isle of Wight".

Nevertheless, these guides were wanting.

"Numerous however as the Isle of Wight guides are, it has been felt by many, that they have hitherto hardly kept pace with the progress of modern research and there is still room for one more which . . . may also provide and direct the powers of observation now happily becoming so general . . . as may satisfy every taste and aid the tourist in the pursuit of his favourite science whatever it may be" (Guide preface iii).

He expressed some lofty principles for his *Guide* trusting it would

". . . prove successful in rendering a visit to its shores more agreeable and instructive if the pleasure of the seaside resort is increased, and the feelings of ennui and weariness which too often hangs heavily on the visitors to our watering-places, are dispelled by discovering how many healthy and legitimate objects of research are within their reach . . . if a love for the study of nature is awakened and a taste for any of the sister sciences which may there be pursued to great advantage, called into existence strengthened, and above all, if a habit of reverential examination of the wonderful works of the All wise Creator is called out or fostered by anything here written, our fondest hopes will be realised.." (Guide preface iv).

Venables was responsible for writing the main part of the *Guide* and the antiquities, history and (perhaps surprisingly) geology. He was unimpressed with the

"Antiquities and Architecture of the Isle of Wight....The Archaeologist will not find the Isle of Wight a very fertile field for his researches."

He had little time for the medieval churches on the Island most of which, at the time of the *Guide*, had not been touched by the Victorian restorers.

"The Churches though often picturesque do not exhibit much good architecture." Norman work is rare with the exception of smaller ruder buildings (e.g., the old Church at Bonchurch)

have we any complete in the style."

The Old Church had narrowly escaped demolition and this was the solitary mention of it. The churches at Brading and Carisbrooke were "*rude and destitute of ornament*". Camden Society ideas were clearly his blind spot. He did express some admiration for church towers: "*that of Carisbrooke is a stately structure.*" He admired the towers of Gatcombe, Chale and Godshill, and formed the view that all were by the same architect (Guide pp 365-368).

Venables delighted in the houses and cottages of the Elizabethan/Jacobean era

" . . . with high pitched gables and mullion windows built of the greystone of the country and encrusted with moss and powdery lichens, some of the greatest ornaments of the rural districts of the Island" (Guide pp 368-369).

Venables detested the work of John Nash, describing his last work, St James East Cowes, "*a miserable example of modern Gothic*"; he also refers to "*the hideous west tower*" (of St Mary's Cowes), and "*gingerbread Gothick*" (East Cowes Castle). The "*present insipid structure*" (Newport Town Hall) was the kindest comment.

He gave full details of the newly discovered Roman Villa at Carisbrooke. He noted laconically other evidence of Roman sites at Clatterford, Barnes, Bonchurch and Norton.

He was a very objective historian and did not often make conjectures. But he did suggest the tumuli at Shalcombe Down might be the grave of the last Jutish King, Arvald. He had little time for the Island as the venue for the Ictis tin route theory and favoured St Michael's Mount (Guide pp 365-366 & 370).

Even before the advent of the railways, there was an inexorable change certainly in coastal communities in the Island. In 1801, Bonchurch was just a fishing hamlet with a population of 65. Development by the local landowner from 1836 onwards transformed Bonchurch into a small seaside and health resort. By 1851 the population had risen to 523. The fishing industry was greatly diminished, and the village now had artistic and literary associations. Charles Dickens had spent several months there in 1849, composing part of *David Copperfield*. A new Church had been erected in 1848 - described in the Guide as "*. . . a plain but well-proportioned edifice in the Norman style . . . the interior is solemn and church-like*", with Elizabeth Missing Sewell, then at the start of her novelist career, as the first organist.

Venables mourned the lost Bonchurch which he must have known.

"A few years since, hardly any part of England surpassed Bonchurch in picturesque beauty. The hand of nature had done so much to adorn and the hand of man so little to spoil . . . the few houses which had been erected were mostly low-thatched cottages, entirely in unison with the scenery and the whole formed a scene of the most fairy-like loveliness" (Guide pp208-209).

By the time of his arrival:

"Now however it is much . . . changed . . . the increase of building which was essential to enable more to enjoy its beauties and to benefit by the

salubrity of its climate has greatly altered the character of the place; it has lost its air of rural retirement, the thatched cottage has given way to the smart-slatted villa; hedgerows and delicious green banks, deep in moss and waving with ferns and creepers, have stiffened into grey stone walls; trees have been felled, footpaths stopped up, shops built and lovely as Bonchurch still is, it is not what it once was. (Guide p209).

He enlisted the help of various eminent contributors for his *Guide*, starting with Robert Sewell (an Island solicitor and brother of Elizabeth), who wrote on agriculture. Alexander G. More was responsible for mammalia, birds, reptiles, fishes, lepidoptera and flowers. George Guyon, assisted by Sir William Jardine, Mr Hanley and Mr Albert Hamborough, contributed papers on coleoptera and land and freshwater snails. Miss Elizabeth Kirkpatrick wrote on Isle of Wight seaweeds. Mr Frederick Smith of the British Museum was responsible for entomology. The main contributors finish with the Rev. Andrew Bloxam on rare mosses, lichen and fungi. Venables acknowledged the assistance of private friends, especially members of the Island clergy.

For us today, Venables' *Guide* is most important. It gives not a snapshot, but a complete picture of the Island just before the advent of the railways - as the Island adopted its tri-pod economy of agriculture, tourism and heavy industry (at West and East Cowes) which was to remain its bedrock for a century, coming to an end suddenly with the collapse of heavy industry in the early 1960s and the slow decline of agriculture for the rest of the 20th century. Those of us of a certain age remember the Island railway network with nostalgia and affection and regret its disappearance. We cannot appreciate the immense impact of railways particularly on rural communities experienced in the early 19th century. Venables accepted the need for railways as being vital for the development of a well-appointed seaside resort or for manufacturing. But he prophesied a devastating impact on the rural scene.

" . . . our lovely glades and quiet valleys will too soon be deformed by the hard rectilinear deformity of embankments and cuttings and their peaceful retirement effectually dispelled by the whizz of the train and the shrill scream of the railway whistle" (Guide pp13-14)

His fears were only too well realised with the coming of the railway to Shanklin. In his later *Guide to the Undercliff* (1867), Venables states:

"There are few places in the Isle of Wight over which a greater change has passed in the last few years than Shanklin. A dozen years since it was hardly more than a small village of thatched cottages and low picturesque villas of the cottage type embossed in verdure . . . the little church of the humblest and most unadorned character . . . the shops were few and unobtrusive and no incongruous element marred the harmony of the scene, but with increasing popularity has necessarily come an enlarged demand for accommodation. The building speculators that had already commenced, received a strong impulse from the opening of the railway from

Ryde in 1862 and the transformation of the pretty quiet village into the bustling town with streets, inns and terraces, tall brick houses and gay gas-lit shops has proceeded with a rapid rate"

(Undercliff Guide p43).

The chapter contributed by Alexander G. More on mammal and bird wildlife is of interest to us today as a historical comparison with the same species. Badgers were scarce whilst foxes were well-established. Stoats were abundant but weasels were rather infrequent. Otters were regarded as occasional visitors from the mainland. The common seal was rare. The kingfisher was scarce and the heron had once nested in the Island. Buzzards were extremely scarce. There was an interesting note on the chough, once associated with the Island.

"A pair or two are still said to linger in the neighbourhood of Blackgang. The time is perhaps not distant when it will disappear from our cliffs".

There is a direct link between the *Guide* and the monumental work edited by Frank Morey in 1909 *A Guide to the Natural History of the Isle of Wight*. The contributors on birds and mammals in that work respectively were Reginald J. Fox and Percy Wadham. Wadham refers to More's Notes in Venables' *Guide* as a previous authority (p529).

It is interesting to compare the species noted by More in the *Guide* with the findings of Wadham and Fox nearly fifty years later. The badger was now extinct in the Island, last seen in 1899. Wadham doubted whether the badger was ever a native of the Island or whether it had been introduced (p534). Foxes were plentiful despite extensive hunting (p533). The stoat was plentiful with one gamekeeper trapping sixty (p534). The weasel had become frequent in certain places with the same gamekeeper trapping forty (p534). No otters had been seen since 1898 (p534). The common seal was now occasionally seen with More quoted as an authority (p533). Fox stated that the kingfisher was resident but not abundant (p510). The heron was plentiful "*constantly to be seen*" (p515). The buzzard was occasionally seen but not breeding (p512). "*The chough is long extinct*", last reported as being seen in 1883 (p508).

Commenting on agriculture, the *Guide* expressed the view that lack of capital prevented the extension of any improvement. There was a lack of enterprise and energy and fear of novelty as well as jealousy of strangers, all of which sentiments might strike chords today! Horses were inferior in quality. The main agricultural products were wheat, lamb, wool, milk and butter (Guide pp345-350).

There were some tradesmen in Ventnor who provided guiding services or sold interesting specimens to speciality tourists as a profitable sideline. Venables mentions them couched in the class language that clergy and gentry would use towards trade in the 19th century.

"Matthew Hale of St Catherine Street is much to be recommended as an intelligent companion whether the object of search be for living organisms or the fossil remains of those of past ages. He has a considerable knowledge and has a good collection of specimens on sale. Mark Norman the fishmonger has also a well-deserved

reputation as a local geologist. We may also choose this place for mentioning for the sake of the entomologist that Lush the hairdresser and Keat at the top of the Zig-zag have good collections of lepidoptera of the undercliff for sale" (Guide p232).

After he left the Island, Venables wrote another guide in 1867 - this time to the Undercliff. This *Guide* with a similar grandiloquent title was solely by Venables and was published by Knight and Sons' Library, High Street, Ventnor. Venables modestly described the book (100 pages) as an "*unpretending little manual*" but it is the first book exclusively relating to the Undercliff.

Venables' main *Guide* was to be the definitive source book on Island history for the next 20 years. It was a major influence on *Letters Historical and Archaeological Relating to the Isle of Wight* by the Rev Edward Boucher James (Matthews, 2022). James made frequent and deferential references to "Canon Venables" and throughout the writing of the *Letters*, James was in regular correspondence with Venables. Although he had left the Island over 30 years before his death, the Isle of Wight County Press in its issue of the 9th March 1895 stated "We record with regret the death of Canon Venables, whose name is a very familiar one in the Isle of Wight. His *History of the Isle of Wight* is a well-known and valuable work."

After his departure from Bonchurch in 1864, he eventually became Canon Residentiary and Precentor at Lincoln Cathedral where he died in office on the 5th March 1895. The Venables family connection with the Island which had started with the Fromows in the 18th century, carried on well into the 20th century. Two daughters lived at Bonchurch, dying respectively in 1928 and 1930. Another daughter, the last of the line, died at Shanklin in 1945.

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