

LOST IN THE SANDS....

From privateers to train stations where the train never arrives, Hayley Reynolds travels back in time and discovers the history of the Newman family and Blackpool Sands.

Sitting gazing out over a seascape that is often named as one of the most beautiful in the world, I reflect on my conversation with Sir Geoffrey Newman and his sister Louisa. I am spellbound. I have just had the privilege of spending two hours listening to the most inspiring, heart warming and intriguing history of the Newman family and the beach at Blackpool Sands.

Sir Geoffrey is true English gentry. He is charming in a friendly and approachable way, intelligent and informed, and both interesting and interested. Louisa shares similar traits. Speaking with her makes you feel relaxed and also leaves you with a desire to be more virtuous. She is caring and thoughtful. When Louisa talks about the beach her eyes light up, she says, "I am in love with our surroundings. I love this place. This was where I grew up. This was my playground."

The family history in this stunning pocket of South Devon extends far beyond Sir Geoffrey, Louisa and their two siblings, Richard and Zabien's, childhood. It can easily be traced back to the 1500s when the Newman family were one of Dartmouth's most highly esteemed merchant traders. At a time when Dartmouth was a renowned shipping port, and when everything moved around on boats, the family was already well established.

In 1797, the gallant Richard Newman decided Dartmouth was getting a little too crowded and bought the, at that time unnamed, land around Blackpool Sands, including the beach and Blackpool House, which has been extended and added to over the years. From this time onwards, Blackpool Sands became the holiday residence of the Newman family.

As with many trades, a combination of the industrial revolution and the two world wars changed both the shipping industry and the family business for ever. In 1945, Sir Ralph Newman was running a wine merchants on St James' street in London with his wife Anne and resumed their holidays, which had stopped during the war years, to Blackpool Sands with their four young children. Sir Geoffrey recalls, "There was a sense of panic in the air every time my parents prepared for the trip to our summer residence. It was like a house move." He and Louisa remember how they caught the steam train at Paddington direct to Kingswear, where they crossed the River Dart by ferry to the Dartmouth train station where a little man with round glasses, adorned in the traditional ticket master clothing, stamped their tickets. Sir Geoffrey continues: "It was the only train station in the country which had no trains arriving or departing from it! The family was then driven from Dartmouth to Blackpool Sands. The trip would take the best part of a day and would be a real adventure."

When Louisa was three, in the late fifties, the family moved to reside permanently at Blackpool House. Louisa reminisces how, as little children, they were often left to their own devices and played happily on the beach, entertaining themselves crabbing, fishing and, when accompanied, on boats. They 'lived on a diet of fish and winkles'.

The beach was opened up to the public and enterprising, hardworking Anne Newman opened 'The Venus Tea Hut', a small wooden hut selling tea and ice creams from neighbour Mr Mesney. Shortly afterwards, Anne started selling home grown vegetables, homemade marmalade and knitted bobble hats from a second hand summerhouse. When Louisa was old enough, in her early teens, she joined her mother helping in the café and the shop.

A new timber built restaurant was put up in the early 70s. This, unfortunately, was washed away by the sea towards the end of the 80s and was re-built in stronger materials as a takeaway with picnic tables at the front.

On the 26th March 1995 The Venus Company opened its doors on the site of the original tea hut. Celebrating its 20th anniversary this year the current café and takeaway shares the same philosophy of serving the best, organically made, locally sourced ingredients with many of its dishes coming from the nearby land or sea. Today, Louisa can mostly be found in the company's kitchen developing new recipes and is married to Michael Smith, who is the current chairman of Food & Drink Devon. They co-own The Venus Company with Lee Porter, who has another fascinating story of her own to tell.

The company's philosophy is best summed up by their strapline 'Loving the Beach'. Michael and Louisa are keen to support and help develop sustainability in the regional economy through enterprise and innovation.

Sir Geoffrey maintains his mission to keep the beach as natural and perfect as it has always been and supports the marine industry in many different ways. He has in the past held the position of chairman of the Marine Conservation Society. His final words are to say, "As children, we adored our wonderful holidays at Blackpool Sands. We want everyone to experience it in the same way as we did, and still do!"

Blackpoolsands.co.uk / Lovingthebeach.co.uk

Things you didn't know about the Newman family

At the time of the Spanish Armada in the 1500s, there were three Newman ships in Sir Francis Drake's fleet.

Not only was Richard Newman a merchant trader, he was also a privateer, which meant he had the King's license to kill anyone untoward from invading ships.

John Newman and his son John helped organise Newfoundland fisheries. Their ships engaged in a triangular trade between Dartmouth, Newfoundland and Portugal, later extending down the coast of Africa to Madagascar and into the Far East.

Goods and utensils were shipped to Newfoundland for the fisheries, salted cod went to the Iberian peninsula and wine from the Newmans' vineyards in the upper Douro valley in Portugal was sent by sea to Newfoundland to mature as port for shipping back to Dartmouth.

Sir Ralph Newman took his place in the army in World War II whilst Anne (soon to become Newman) drove ambulances through the aftermath of the blitz. Sir Ralph's wine shop was bombed during the war.

Things you didn't know about Blackpool Sands and The Venus Company

During the war, Blackpool Sands was out of bounds. Named 'Quartermaster's land', mines were planted in the ground behind the beach.

Sir Ralph and Anne Newman opened a car park 1947, with attendant. The charge was one shilling. Concrete pavements, ex US blocks wired at each end in sets of eight, created the hard standing.

Until 1949 there were no toilets. Sir Ralph built 'The Necessary', which George Washington had called such facilities, and was one of the first to charge to help keep them maintained.

The bell tower on the turnstile at Blackpool Sands is from Henry VIII's reign. Sir Ralph saw it on a hunting lodge in Highgate and had it shipped down.

Sir Ralph had a love of signs. One sign said that coffee was served 'mornings only'.

He was also a great stargazer and a fan of Greek mythology. Venus may have been named after the planet, which shines brightly at night over this breathtakingly stunning bay, but is more likely to have come from 'Venus Anadyomene emerging from the sea'.