



# FIGARAMA COMES TO CALVERTS

by Hillard Morley



When I moved to the Island some twenty-five years ago, Newport town centre was still a hub for shopping. Saturdays were spent traipsing between Boots and Bodyshop, Waterstones and Woolworth's—with a quick pop into Laura Ashley if I felt flush. Many of those shops have gone now; once-famous names have disappeared entirely from our high streets, or fade above the entrance to a long-empty unit, a testament to changing times. In an age when many purchases are made online, there's no longer any need to pound the streets at weekends buying stuff. We still shop—but do it differently, and town centres have to become spaces for something else.

There are names that survive; Calvert's Hotel is one of them, though the building has been no stranger to change. For nearly three centuries it has stood at the top of Quay Street: first as the prestigious residence of the town's Mayor, and later as an impressive hotel, known in those days as Warburton's. Once awarded a royal warrant by Queen Victoria, it looks relatively unassuming now. I must admit I barely noticed during those shopping trips, save for its grand entrance porch and the niche above—if you look closely, the wooden frieze displaying the warrant is still there.

It wasn't until I was asked to play the poet Charlotte Mew in StoneCrabs Theatre's *Places and Faces* literary walk that I paid it any real attention. In search of the Newport Mew had known, I devoured books of old photographs and there it was: resplendent opposite the Guildhall, a busy focal point for the life of the town.

Looking into the history of Calvert's—reopening in the 1960s with a new name but retaining its central place in the Island's life and community—I discovered its role in many notable events. It was a favoured meeting spot for barristers and solicitors working on the Parkhurst Prison riot trials at the end of that decade, and later a gathering place for the committee who established Quay Arts just down the road in Sea Street in the 1970s. Time and again, the hotel has found itself at the crux of innovation and change.

It may be quieter now than in its Victorian heyday, but it has kept its elegant façade. If you venture in, you'll find a civilised and friendly place, which is precisely

what drew Naked Figleaf Press | Figmentum Books to it: to make a home Figarama, a new event on the Isle of Wight.

Over two days—27 and 28 March—Calvert's will once again fill with voices as Figarama brings together local writers and readers for a celebration of the Island's writing scene. Expect readings, workshops, book sales, launches and conversations, as the hotel returns to its historic role as a centre of inspiration, a meeting place for social and creative interaction. Come along to meet the many writers who work on this Island...surely that's a more exciting reason to step into Newport than a spot of shopping?