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RYDE SOCIAL HERITAGE GROUP

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About us

Membership is open to anyone who is interested in the heritage of the town of Ryde, Isle of Wight.

Research is centred on Ryde Cemetery, and the people who are buried there, their links to Ryde's past, their lives, homes, businesses, families and descendants.

Website

www.rshg.org.uk

19th Century Entertainments in Ryde



One of the earliest tales of entertainment in Ryde is that of the "Celebrated Mrs Jordan" appearing in one of her final performances at Ryde Theatre, in 1813.

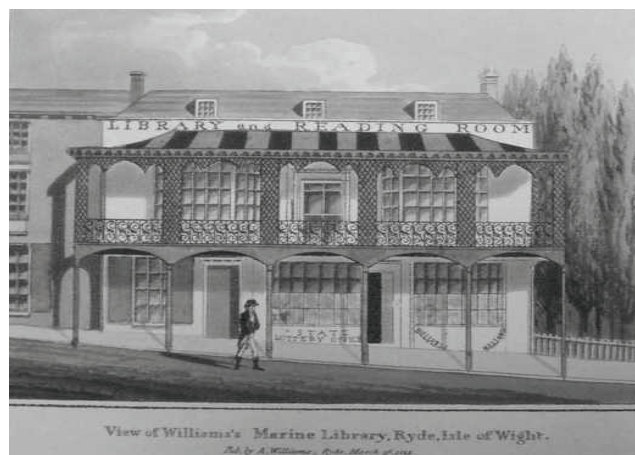
Dorothy Phillips (Mrs Jordan), 1761 – 1816, was a well-known actress, courtesan and long term mistress of the future William IV, with whom she had at least ten illegitimate children. The Dictionary of National Biography tells us she performed at theatres in Southampton, Portsmouth, Gosport and Ryde in 1812 and 1813, "in spite of her dismay at the rowdiness of the seafaring audiences". We can only hope that Ryde was a little more genteel than the mainland seafarers! This picture of Dorothy in the character of Hypolita, is by John Jones, 1791.

The theatre in which Mrs Jordan appeared was on the site of the present day National Westminster Bank, in St Thomas' Square. It was later replaced by another, more modern building, the Theatre Royal, on the same site.

With the advent of newspapers in Ryde in 1852, some snippets give us an insight into what was occurring in the mid nineteenth century.

The front page of edition one of the Isle of Wight Observer in 1852, advertises an already established library, in Verandah House, Union Street, Ryde.

"The LIBRARY contains upwards of three thousand standard English novels and works of merit. FIVE HUNDRED VOLUMES of the most Popular French Authors, and a good Selection of German and Italian Literature." People would have been able to read the national newspapers of the day, as well as the latest additions: Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, Egerton's Winter Tour in India and Cumming's Lion Hunter.

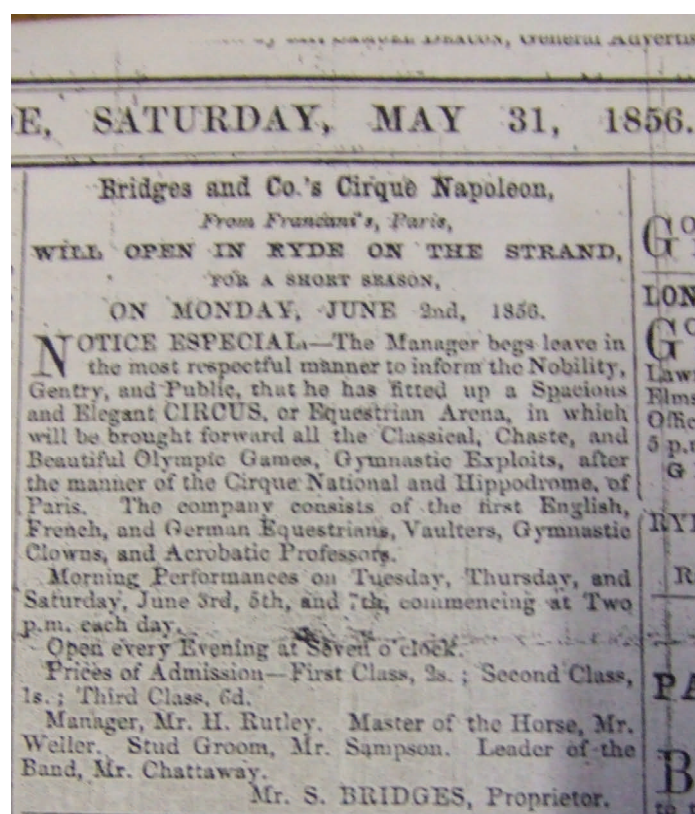


In October 1852, we learn that a concert given by the Ryde Quadrille Band, organised by the Harmonic Society, was "a great improvement to the more gross amusements which characterised such meetings twenty years ago, and undoubtedly has an elevating tendency, as it creates taste among the working classes, and introduces kindly feelings".

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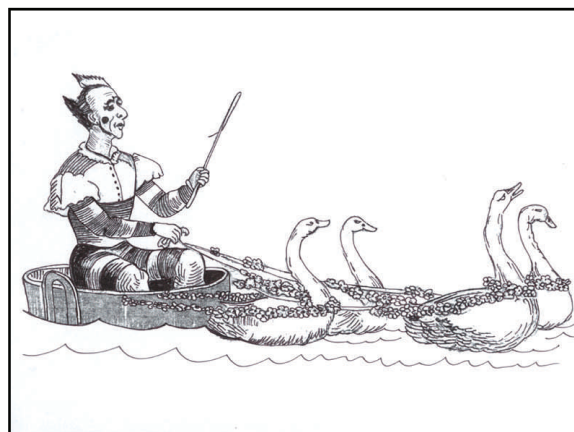
Also in October 1852, Sir James Caldwell, of Beachlands House, Dover Street, was one of the patrons of the theatre. In the Observer of the 16th of that month, we read: "On Monday last, the performances were under the patronage of Sir James Caldwell, GCB, and a full house was the result. The feature of the evening was the production of a new ballet, called "Jock o'Inverness", or "Love in the Highlands"". The report goes on to say, "The Double Highland Fling and Grand Scotch Pas de Deux, by Mons Harvie and Mdlle Louise, justly deserved the applause they met. Mr T Fry, as the Dancing Scotchman, was capital, and his Clog Dance highly relished".

Sir James Caldwell was a particularly hospitable man and, like many of his contemporaries in Ryde, threw open his house and grounds for entertainment purposes. However, he did also include the 'lower classes'. In January 1856, the paper reports a dance held at Beachlands for "the leading tradesmen, his domestics and others": "A splendid suite of rooms was thrown open to the guests for dancing and refreshments, while the conservatory afforded a cool and grateful promenade. Dancing was literally plunged into at half-past nine, when the venerable and gallant General paid the room a visit, and he seemed highly pleased with the hilarity around him." In the same month, another "TRADESMAN'S SUPPER" was held in the Green Dragon Inn, Union Street, by Mr Mackay, "to which about 40 sat down".



Later that year, Bridges' Circus came to town, and set up on the Strand for the month of June. The circus was well received, and the clown, Mr Nelson, also provided extra entertainment for the town during the month.

The Observer reports, on 21 June 1856: "NOVEL MOVE – Mr Nelson, the clown in Bridges' Circus, brought together an immense crowd on the Esplanade on Thursday afternoon to witness his aquatic feat of being drawn by four geese in a washing tub from the Pier to the end of the Esplanade. He made his appearance in the tub with the geese harnessed to it, but instead of being drawn by them, he propelled the whole with a couple of small paddles". This was the same month the laying out of the Esplanade was completed.



The illustration is an adaptation of a drawing called "Clown on the Thames" from PeoplePlay UK website. It is not a picture of Mr Nelson, but is, perhaps, what he might have looked like.

www.peopleplayuk.org.uk

By the mid 19th century, there were several entertainment venues in the town: The Town Hall and Victoria Rooms in Lind Street, the Theatre Royal in St Thomas' Square, the Oddfellows' Hall in the High Street, to name a few. During the season, Ryde Pier was filled with the music of military bands, the Pier Pavilion was also regularly hosting various events, and there were Billiard Rooms in Union Street.

By November of 1868, the Isle of Wight Times was well established in Ryde, and The Victoria Billiard Club is advertising at 75 Union Street, with H J Hoppett, Proprietor: "Gentlemen will find this Club the most commodious and elegant of the kind in the Island, comprising Smoking and Refreshment Rooms, supplied with viands and edibles of the best description. Daily, Local and other newspapers. Open to members only. Terms see printed circular. Lessons given".



The theatre at this time was generally open for the season, from May to September. In 1867, the manager was Mr Chas Harcourt, (T.R., Drury Lane). The Theatre Royal advertisement in the Isle of Wight Observer for September 7, reads:

"Last Six Nights of the Season, in consequence of Mr Charles Harcourt's re-appearance in Drury Lane on the 21st September.

ON MONDAY, Sept 9th, the celebrated Amateur, CAPT. HOOD, in two favourite characters, for this night only. – THE-TICKET-OF-LEAVE MAN; Hawkshaw, Capt. Hood – MY PRECIOUS BETSY: Bobtail, Capt. Hood.

Tuesday evening, for the BENEFIT of Miss MARY HENDERSON – GOOD FOR NOTHING, GREEN BUSHES, and CLOCKMAKER'S HAT.

Wednesday, a Grand Fashionable Night, under the distinguished Patronage of Sir A CLIFFORD, Bart., STILL WATERS RUN DEEP, and WHITEBAIT AT GREENWICH.

Doors open at half-past 7, the curtain to rise at 8. Prices of Admission: Boxes, 3s.; Upper-Boxes, 1s. 6d.; Pit, 1s.; Gallery, 6d.; half-price to Boxes only at half-past 9. Box Plan at the Misses Gibbs' Library, where places may be secured."

The Victoria Rooms, in Lind Street, opposite the Town Hall, were the scene of many varied entertainments throughout the latter half of the 19th century. In May 1858, the townsfolk of Ryde were treated to "MARSHALL'S GRAND COLOSSAL MOVING PANORAMA of the MUTINY IN INDIA!" This "MOST INSTRUCTIVE and INTERESTING EXHIBITION", under the Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen had already shown to nearly "ONE MILLION OF PERSONS". It comprised "Sketches taken on the spot by an Eye Witness of the Scenes depicted and Painted on 20,000 square feet of Canvas by most eminent Scenic Artists of the present day". There was also advertised "A Grand Fashionable MORNING PERFORMANCE by Gas Light, on Tuesday, and Thursday, June 1st and 3rd, at 2 o'clock".

Although military bands were performing on an almost daily basis on the Pier and around the town, in 1858 a meeting was held in the Eagle Hotel to establish a Town Band. "It is proposed that the band should play three nights in the week, (weather permitting), in the principal parts of the town; and the committee hope to obtain the consent of the proprietors of Ryde House Park, St John's Park, Binstead, St Clare, Westfield &c., for the use of their beautiful grounds for the purpose of giving a series of musical promenades during the season." Ryde also had at this time a recently formed Ryde Philharmonic Society, and Ryde Musical Union. Mr Holloway, Professor of Music, 4 Lind Terrace, was involved with both of these groups. The Ryde Volunteers Band was also formed around this time, led by Mr Jones. In July 1860, Frederick Augustus Lewis, of Monkton Street, was moved to write to the Editor of the Observer, having been to one of their concerts the previous evening: "...Miss Cicely Nott sang and played admirably, as also did Miss Jones. What with the *beauty of the ladies* and the beauty of the music, I was entranced. If I, as a *despairing old bachelor*, went away with the heartache by the one, I certainly went away with my heart full of the other. I could not help inwardly exclaiming "GOD BLESS OUR VOLUNTEERS"".

Cicely Nott was the grandmother of Esmerelda Cicely Courtneidge who played the role of "Mum" in the first series of the London Weekend Television comedy "On the Buses", opposite Reg Varney and Anna Karen.

The Battalion Band was engaged in 1863 to play on the Pier between 5 and 7 o'clock every Wednesday evening. Alarmed that the trades people of Ryde would "be deprived altogether of their *al fresco* musical evenings" as this was the "usual tea hour", the hours were soon changed to between 6 and 8pm. The band had recently acquired new uniforms: "It is a fact that the well-executed airs and overtures from the instruments of our improved and still improving band, will sound none the less sweetly because the musicians are respectably and tastefully attired".

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In April 1869, the new Assembly Room, in the east wing of the Town Hall, was opened. It was designed by Francis Newman, and 800 assembled guests were entertained by the band of the 1st Isle of Wight Rifle Volunteers, under bandmaster, Mr H Field. A band of glee singers, accompanied by some choir boys from around the town, sang a selection including "The chough and the crow", and "Hark! Apollo strikes the lyre", both by Bishop.

The 1860s and 1870s were a period of great activity in the Victoria Rooms. Some of the productions were as follows: Professor Logrenia, who exhibited his "wonderful MAGICAL ILLUSIONS", introducing "the wonderful performing Russian Cat, Learned Canary Birds, and White Mice". On the same programme, September 1862, Mr Walter Morris performed, "On the Musical Rocks and Ophonic Crystal, the music of which are like the delicious tones of Angels' harps". In 1868, Professor G W Stone presented a "series of grand fashionable BIOLOGICAL SEANCES". This "WONDERFUL, ASTONISHING AND AMUSING PHENOMENA produced upon persons in a perfectly wakeful state, who voluntarily offer from among the audience, have attracted crowded and intelligent audiences in all the Fashionable Towns and Cities of the United Kingdom, and throughout the civilized world".



One of the most well-known acts to appear at the Victoria Rooms was Charles Stratton, better known as General Tom Thumb, and his wife, Lavinia. They appeared in Ryde on 26 and 27 September 1865.

"The WHOLE PARTY will appear, in the above magnificent Rooms (Victoria Rooms), in their CELEBRATED ENTERTAINMENT, as given by them, by command of Her Most Gracious Majesty, in the Rubens Room, Windsor Castle, before the Royal Family, on the 24th June last....At the 11 o'clock Levee ONLY do they appear in their WEDDING COSTUME. The Little Party will Ride to and from their Hotel in their MINIATURE CARRIAGE, drawn by the SMALLEST PONIES IN THE WORLD." At this time, most of the acts appearing in Ryde, had either come from London or New York, or were going on to perform there. Ryde was a first rate venue.

In 1874, a huge craze for Roller Skating "on the American Principle", using "the Plimpton Patent Roller Skate" came to Ryde. An indoor rink was set up in the Victoria Rooms: "The elegant and graceful manner in which the ladies and gentlemen flit about the room has a most pleasing effect". This 'rink' lasted for several months, and in December the Royal Marines Band was engaged to accompany the skaters. An outdoor rink was then built in St John's, presumably in the present Rink Road, which attracted hundreds, and was hugely successful.

It was obviously a pastime which persisted, as this postcard exists with the following written on the reverse: "Mr Bradfield, our skating instructor, 1914".

The St John's Rink proved so popular, a plan was drawn up in 1876 to create another in "a central position", between Brigstocke Terrace and St Thomas' Church.

"There is quite sufficient class distinction in Ryde to create a necessity for at least two rinks, and we believe there is ample room for a third grade affair." The "cruise upon wheels", was so popular that "fly drivers, the proprietors of livery stables, and the shopkeepers complain grievously of the counter-attractions of the rink". This craze even attracted theatrical attention. In August 1876, at the Town Hall "a Musical Sketch, entitled SLAVES OF THE RINK, will be given by Mr Corney Grain".



Mr Bradfield. Thanks to the Isle of Wight Record Office for this postcard

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1874 was a busy year in Ryde, as Mrs Scott Siddons, a great grand daughter of the celebrated actress Sarah Siddons, advertised to appear in Ryde, "In her Histrionic Readings", alongside "Seraphael, THE CELEBRATED BOY PIANIST, AGED TWELVE YEARS".

On 13 August 1874, a report in the Isle of Wight Times, gave the reason behind the postponement of the performance: "Our readers will regret to hear that Mrs Siddons a short time since was thrown from her horse and had her spine injured, and that a few days ago, for a throat complaint, a quantity of caustic was administered in mistake for brandy and caustic: her servant removing the glass containing the brandy on clearing the dinner table. Patrons were assured of a full refund from Mr Aylward."

The Blondinette Melodists were appearing the same month: "This attractive troupe has visited Ryde before, and we have no doubt that they will attract large audiences during their present visit by their refined and pleasing entertainment. The press are unanimous in its approval of their performances".

A highly-regarded and well-known actress to appear many times at Ryde was Amy Sedgwick. Born in Bristol, Amy made her London stage debut at the Richmond Theatre in 1853, playing Julia in "The Hunchback" by Sheridan Knowles. In Cardiff, she took the part of Pauline in Bulwer-Lytton's "The Lady of Lyons". 1857 saw Amy play the first Hester Grazebrook in Tom Taylor's "Unequal match", a part she first brought to Ryde in 1865. Her name long remained associated with this role. She gave recitals and readings around the country, and more than once read before Queen Victoria.

Another popular event in the Victoria Rooms in August 1875 was Woodroffe's American Glass Blowing Exhibition. "Two Steam Engines, made entirely of Glass, will be kept in constant Operation during the Exhibition."

Mrs Woodroffe made "Ships, Birds of Paradise, Chariots drawn by Swans, Vases of flowers, &c.". Her husband "Will Explain and Illustrate PHILOSOPHICAL AND FANCY GLASS BLOWING in all its Branches". William Woodroffe had begun his career as a clown in Barnum and Bailey's circus, and sadly committed suicide in New York in 1911.



Amy Sedgwick by an unknown photographer

During this time, other entertainments were vying for audiences around the town. In August 1874, the Royal Poland Street Temperance Hand Bell Ringers appeared in the Town Hall. "There was again a very large attendance, and it was evident that the utmost satisfaction was given and delight afforded by the wonderful performances, and numberless sweet sounds produced from a few bells."

Not all performers were so lucky in attracting a large audience however. In the same month, "MISS NANNIE PRAEGER – was announced to give a grand pianoforte recital in the Town Hall, on Friday afternoon, but as there was no audience – she did not do so".

Spelling, History and Singing Bees were very popular around this time, attracting large crowds and eliciting several letters to the newspaper editors. In February 1876, Mayor Benjamin Barrow was obviously keen to educate the town, as he announced he would give an extra prize to anyone who could tell him how the joint sirloin came by its name. "King Charles II was dining off this particular joint, on one occasion, and declared it to be so good that he said he would knight it, which he did, and it had ever since been called sirloin."

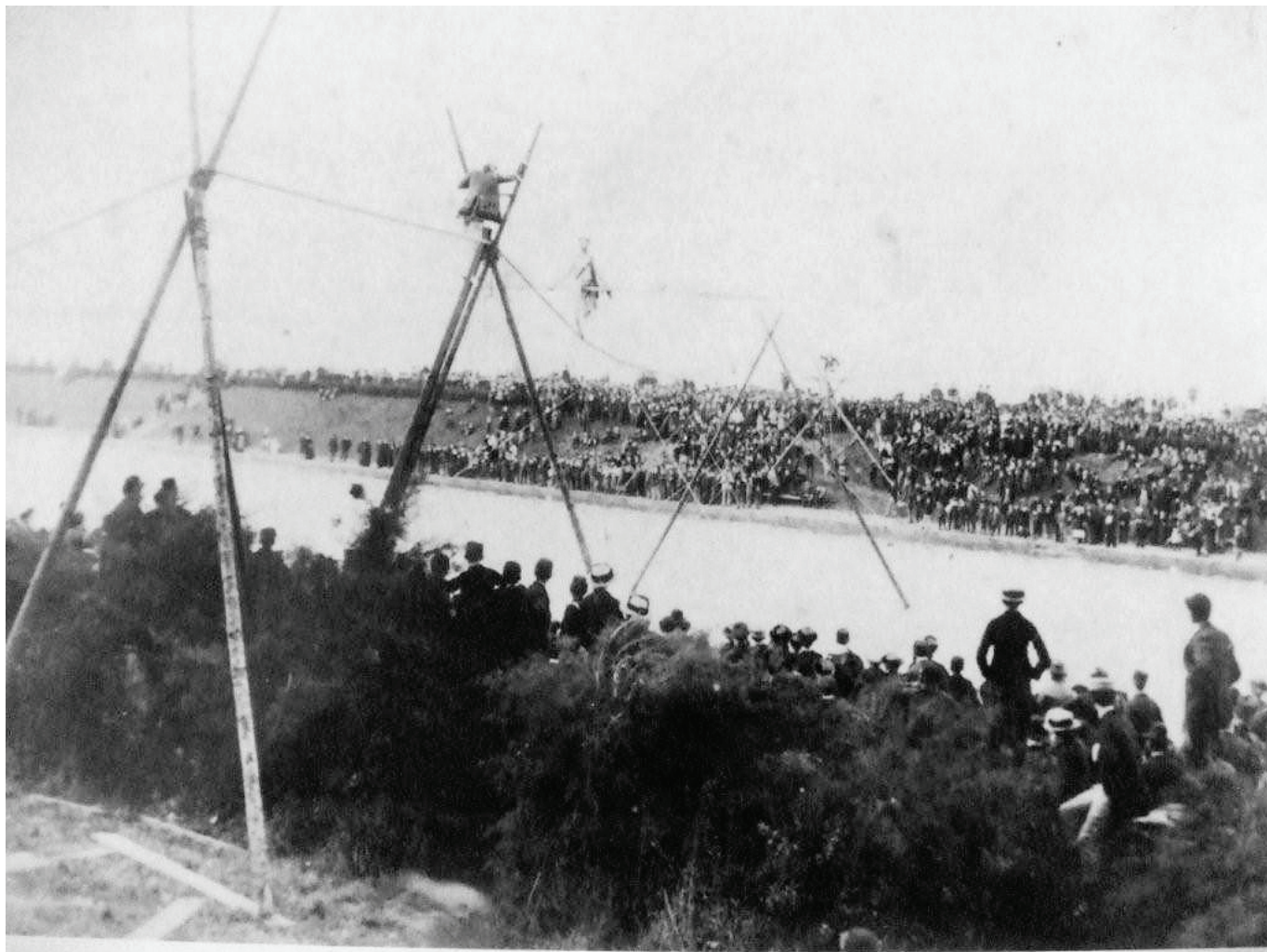
At the end of the competition, and before the test to see who would take first and second prize, "Mrs GURNELL favoured the audience with the good old song, "My lodgings are on the cold, cold ground", which she sang with great sweetness and taste. In response to the loud encore, she gave "I'd be a butterfly".

Mayor Barrow did a lot to ensure the recreational pursuits of Ryde were catered for. In July 1876, the following report appears in the press: "NEW RECREATION GROUND – The Mayor has rented a piece of ground in the Marshes adjoining the skating rink, and places it at the disposal of the inhabitants for a limited period, for the purpose of recreation from 12 noon till 9 at night. Persons guilty of using bad language, gambling, injuring the fences, or bringing intoxicating liquors on the ground will be immediately turned off. No children will be admitted during school hours, and all disputes will be settled by the Mayor whose decision will be final, and all those refusing to act upon it will not be allowed again on the ground. The conditions are not hard ones, and we are sure the public generally ought to be grateful to his worship. We do not like to "look a gift horse in the mouth", but we think his worship would confer a greater boon, if he would open the ground early in the morning. Many would be glad to play a game of cricket in the mornings before breakfast".

Balls, bazaars, concerts, lectures, recitals – all went on in Ryde in the 19th century. The circus came to town, and bands played on the Pier.

One notable event added to the fun of Ryde Regatta in 1883: "The rope walking performance of Mons Croix from Portsmouth, though not on the programme, attracted great attention. Unfortunately, the performer, after keeping the immense crowd waiting till it was nearly dark, had to abandon the attempt to cross the Lake, the rope being too slack for the purpose. He promised, however, to do it the following day, when he successfully accomplished the feat".

Ryde, in the nineteenth century, was obviously a very entertaining place! This is only a small sample of what was on offer; the variety of events being organised by both the professionals and local people of all classes.



Thanks to the RSHG Research Group for all their hard work in the production of this newsletter.